ATLAS

Too Much ... Too Soon

by Tony Atlas

with Scott Teal

ATLAS: Too Much ... Too Soon

by Tony Atlas, with Scott Teal

Copyright © 2005 by Tony Atlas and Scott Teal

All rights reserved.
No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form
or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying,
recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system,
without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Crowbar Press
106 Tattnall Court
Gallatin, Tennessee.
crowbarpress.com

Book and cover layout by Scott Teal

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Atlas, Tony
ATLAS: Too Much ... Too Soon / by Tony Atlas, with Scott Teal — Kindle ed.
1. Atlas, Tony 2. Sports—United States—Biography. 3. Wrestling—United States—Biography.
I. Teal, Scott. II. Title.

Printed in the United States of America
ISBN 978-0-9844090-2-0

First manuscript edition: October 2010
Kindle edition: April 2014

OTHER BOOKS PUBLISHED BY CROWBAR PRESS INCLUDE:

Inside Out by Ole Anderson, with Scott Teal [0-9745545-0-2]

Wrestlers Are Like Seagulls by James J. Dillon, with Scott Teal and Philip Varriale [0-9745545-2-9]

Assassin: The Man Behind the Mask by Joe Hamilton, with Scott Teal [0-9745545-3-7]

"Is That Wrestling Fake?" by Ivan Koloff, with Scott Teal [978-0-9745545-4-9]

Bruiser Brody by Emerson Murray, edited by Scott Teal [978-0-9745545-5-6]

Wrestling with the Truth by Bruno Lauer, edited by Scott Teal [0-9745545-7-0]

The Solie Chronicles by Bob Allyn, with Pamela S Allyn and Scott Teal [978-0-9745545-8-7]

Wrestling in the Canadian West by Vance Nevada, edited by Scott Teal [978-0-9745545-9-4]

Long Days and Short Pays by Hal West, edited by Scott Teal [978-0-9844090-0-6]

Drawing Heat by Jim Freedman [978-0-9844090-

1-3]
ATLAS: Too Much, Too Soon by Tony Atlas, with Scott Teal [978-0-9844090-2-0]
The Last Laugh by Bill De Mott, with Scott Teal [978-0-9844090-3-7]
HOOKER by Lou Thesz, with Kit Bauman [978-0-9844090-4-4]
The Last Outlaw by Stan Hansen, with Scott Teal [978-0-9844090-5-1]
NIKITA: A Tale of the Ring and Redemption by Nikita Koloff, as told to William Murdock [978-0-9844090-6-8]
The Strap: A Complete History of Sam Muchnick's Missouri State Championship [978-0-9844090-8-2]
BRISCO by Jack Brisco, as told to William Murdock [978-0-9844090-9-9]
Mid-Atlantic Wrestling Memories by Mike Mooneyham [978-1-9403910-1-4]
"I Ain't No Pig Farmer!" by Dean Silverstone, with Scott Teal [978-1-9403910-2-1]
DURANGO by Chuck Thornton [978-0-9844090-7-5]

Charles Starrett: Before Durango by Chuck Thornton [978-1-9403910-0-7]

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements
Tony Atlas Chronology
Testimonials
1. Tony James-Caswell-McDuffy-White
2. Redeye Hinton
3. Lobster Tails and Scrambled Eggs
4. Hercules
5. The Telephone Call
6. Learning the Ropes
7. A Mattress, a Boxspring, and the

Floor
8. Black Atlas
9. If the Walls Could Talk
10. Mr. U.S.A
11. Big Arms, Skinny Necks
12. Racism in Wrestling
13. Tennis Shoes
14. That Thing
15. Tag Team Champions
16. My Worst Enemy
17. The Downward Spiral
18. The Black Superman
19. Bruiser Brody
20. Crossroads
21. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."
22. True Life

[23. New Life](#)
[24. Credit Where Credit is Due](#)

Acknowledgements

There are so many people I want to thank for the blessings I've discovered in life.

First and foremost, I have to thank my mother and grandmother. They had nothing to do with the women's liberation movement, but they demonstrated the power women have to shape the lives of young men like me. My mother made great sacrifices and endured many hardships in order to raise her children.

My brother, Charles. My mother taught her family to look out for each other, and that's exactly what my brother, Charles, and I did. We faced poverty and hardship together. Charles and I have a special bond that no adversity can sever.

J.C. Williams, who treated me like a son and fed me when our family didn't have anything to eat.

In the chapters which follow, I will tell you more about them, but Alfonso Johnson, Randy Booth, Steve Aegis, and Jackie Cooper all played a big part in my physical development.

George and Sandy Scott created Tony Atlas. If it wasn't for them, I would probably be in prison … or worse. They shepherded me along. Sandy discovered me at the YMCA and set the wheels rolling that gave my wrestling career a kick start. Sandy was like an uncle to me, while George was like the father I've never known. George would point to me and tell people, "That's my son."

Ole Anderson developed me. He was my personal coach. He took an interest in me and pushed me to be the best I could be. He knew what it took to make me understand the wrestling business, even if he had to scream and curse to get

my attention.

Larry Sharpe was my original trainer and Gene Anderson took up my training where Larry left off.

Rufus R. Jones and Ernie Ladd were the only two wrestlers I knew personally who I never heard anything bad said about. They were totally non-racial, very business oriented, and dependable. The promoters never had to worry about them. They set a high standard for black wrestlers.

Paul Boesch was the first promoter who stood up for me and paid me the same amount of money the world champion got.

Tito Santana and Ricky Steamboat are two people who always were friends, even during the times when I wasn't such a good person. Even today, when Tito hears about an upcoming show, he always tells the promoter, "Why don't you use Tony Atlas?" Ricky would always make sure I

walked the narrow line. When I was working for the WWE, if he noticed me doing something which might get me in trouble, he always took time to pull me aside and speak to me quietly.

So many times, I disappointed both Vince McMahon, Jr. and Vince McMahon, Sr. by my misconduct, but they always brought me back and gave me work. I don't think anyone has been fired from the WWF as many times as I have, and where many other wrestlers were never given a second chance, the McMahons were always forgiving of my wrongdoing.

SD Jones was the one person in the wrestling business that I could say was my friend … with no conditions. We were brothers. Even when I screwed him out of the WWF tag team title, he forgave me. Whenever I was at my worst, SD was there for me. He even trusted me enough to live in his house with his wife when he was on the road. I owe my life to him.

When I was homeless, the Lewiston Police Department kept me out of jail. They could have arrested me several times for things I did or had in my possession. Instead, they would take whatever I had and say, "Tony, someday the phone is going to ring and you're going back to wrestling." They were always very supportive of me, even when I was at my worst.

Every time I made a trip home to Roanoke, Matt Chittum of the Roanoke Times would write an article about me. I appreciate him thinking I was worthy of writing about.

Scott Epstein, the workhouse for the World Bodybuilding Guild, was like a brother. I liked him immediately when I met him at my first bodybuilding contest. Scott never saw the "mean" Tony Atlas because he brought out the best in me. Whenever a bodybuilding contest was scheduled, he would let me know about it and would tell me about the competitors and quite often picked up the tab for my hotel room. Scott had a

lot of clout with Dan Lurie, the head of the WBBG, and he always encouraged him to use me.

Thanks to Philip Varriale and Bruce Trembley for their painstaking transcription of the interview tapes.

Mike Mooneyham, who faithfully followed my career and wrote a long series of articles about me for the [Charleston, SC] Post-Courier newspaper.

Rich Tate, the webmaster for the georgiawrestlinghistory.com website, shared needed information about a few of my matches in Georgia.

My editor tells me J Michael Kenyon is the top historian in the world. He corrected some key historical information and proofread the final manuscript.

The creation of this book has been a long, and yet enjoyable, journey. I can't thank Scott Teal enough for the work he did as my editor and

publisher. I'm in awe of the patience and diligence he puts into his work. He unearthed facts about me that I had long since forgotten. I have come to appreciate Scott and the other wrestling historians who have a passion for recording the history of our business. If it weren't for them, the so-called "wrestling legends" would have been forgotten a long time ago. People write about everything that happened after Hulk Hogan took the wrestling world by storm, but what about the people who were there before Hogan? If it weren't for the historians, people like Bruno Sammartino, Tarzan Tyler, Ivan Koloff, Lou Thesz, Killer Kowalski, and many hundreds of others, would have been forgotten.

I saved the best for last. Monika. She was and is my angel. She was Heaven sent. When I was homeless, she took pity on me and took me in. She gave me a place to live and put me back on my feet. I was in poverty, and at the time, she was only making $120 a week (of which $60 went towards the rent), but she fed me and did what she

could to help. She worried about me every day. A month or so after she took me in, I went back onto the streets and bought a bag of weed. She gave me an ultimatum. "Either the drugs go … or you do. One of you has to leave my house." I chose to stay. Thanks to her, I became a licensed physical trainer and eventually went back to work for the WWE. I can never repay her for the kindness and love she has shown me.

Tony Atlas' Chronology (April 23, 1954) ... Born in Clifton Forge, Virginia.
(1966) ... Sent to live at the Virginia Negro Baptist Children's Home.
(1969) ... Sent to live at the Chesterfield County Reception and Diagnostic Center.

(1973) ... Teenage Mr. Virginia, 1st place.
(1973) ... Virginia powerlifting championship, 1st place.
(1973) ... Sets Virginia state AAU bench press record of 350 pounds.
(1974) ... Graduates from Patrick Henry High School.
(March 1975) ... Begins pro wrestling training at the Charlotte Park Center.
(July 10, 1975) ... Makes his pro wrestling debut in Anderson, South Carolina.
(October 1975) ... Goes on the road to Kansas City, Dallas, Amarillo, and San Antonio territories.

(November 15, 1976) ... Begins wrestling in the Atlanta territory as the Black Atlas.
(1976) ... Wins NWA Georgia television title.
(February 1976) ... Wrestles in Guatemala.
(August 1977) ... Wins NWA (Mid Atlantic) World tag team title w/Mr. Wrestling #2 from Ole and Gene Anderson.
(November 1977) ... Wins NWA Georgia tag team title w/Tommy Rich from the Executioner and Pak Song (November 1977);.
(1978) ... WBBG Mr. North Carolina bodybuilding

championship, 1st place.
(1978) ... Mr. Eastern America bodybuilding championship, 1st place.
(1978) ... WBBG Mr. Southern Hemisphere bodybuilding championship ... , 1st place.
(1978) ... Tony marries for first time, to Joyce.
(February 1978) ... Wins NWA Georgia tag team title w/Mr. Wrestling #2 from Jacques Goulet and Ole Anderson.
(June 1978) ... Wins NWA Georgia tag team title w/Thunderbolt Patterson from Ivan Koloff and Ole Anderson.

(September 1978) ... Wins NWA Mid-Atlantic heavyweight title from Ken Patera.
(July 31, 1979) ... Makes first appearance at WWF television taping at Allentown, Pennsylvania.
(1979) ... WBBG Pro Mr. USA, 1st place.
(1979) ... WBBG Pro Mr. America, 2nd place.
(November 1979) ... Splits his time wrestling in Atlanta and New York.
(1981) … Mr. Hercules, 1st place
(April 1980) ... Wins NWA Georgia tag team title w/Kevin Sullivan from Alexis Smirnoff and Ivan Koloff.

(Summer 1980) ... Tony and Joyce get divorced.
(Summer 1980) ... Tony meets Lori, who will become his common-law wife.
(October 1980) ... Wins NWA Georgia heavyweight title from Dennis Condrey.
(March 16, 1981) ... Tony pins Hulk Hogan in Madison Square Garden.
(August 1981) ... Begins wrestling a full-time schedule with the WWF.
(September 1982) ... Wins SCW (Southwest) brass knuckles title from Mongolian Stomper [Archie Gouldie].
(October 2, 1982) ... NPC National

bodybuilding championship, 15th place.
(November 1983) ... Wins WWF world tag team title w/Rocky Johnson from Samoans [Afa and Sika Anoai].
(1984) ... Tony and Lori split up.
(May 1984) ... Tony meets Lisa, who he will marry in 1985.
(May 1984) ... Tony goes to work for the American Wrestling Association in Minneapolis.
(October 29, 1984) ... Tony returns to the WWF.
(April 7, 1986) ... Wrestles in a 20-man battle royal at WrestleMania II.

(December 1986) ... Wins WCCW (World Class) televison title from Crusher Yurkof [Bam Bam Bigelow].
(April 1987) ... Wins WWC North American tag team title w/Miguelito Perez from Bob Heffernan and Gran Mendoza.
(June 1987) ... Wins WCWA (World Class) Texas tag team title w/Skip Young from Texas Red and Ted Arcidi.
(1987) ... Wrestles in Dallas as the Black Superman.
(August 1987) ... Wins NWA (World Class) Texas brass knuckles title from Abdullah the Butcher.

(September 1987) ... Wins WWC Caribbean (Puerto Rico) title from Hercules Ayala.
(July 16, 1988) ... Tony is present at fatal stabbing of Bruiser Brody in San Juan, Puerto Rico.
(Late 1988) ... Tony and Lisa get divorced.
(1989) ... Begins working for Mario Savoldi in Maine.
(February 1989) ... Wins ICW (New England) heavyweight title from Joe Savoldi.
(1990) ... Tony becomes homeless.
(1990) ... Monika Deranek gives Tony a place to live and a fresh start.

(August 28, 1990) ... Tony goes back to work for the WWF as Saba Simba.
(April 19, 1991) ... Wins ICW (New England) heavyweight title from Vic Steamboat.
(May 1992) ... Wins AWF (Puerto Rico) North American heavyweight title.
(September 1992) ... Wins WWWA (Pennsylvania) Intercontinental title from Jack Hammer.
(September 1992) ... Tony marries Monika Deranek.
(October 5, 1992) ... Tony goes to work for WCW.
(December 1993) ... Wins CWA

(New England) heavyweight title from Vic Steamboat.
(1994) ... w/S.D. Jones, wins Universal Wrestling Superstars (New York) tag team title.
(December 1995) ... Wins NEPW (New England) heavyweight title from Big City Mike.
(May 1997) ... Tony becomes the booker for the Eastern Wrestling Alliance.
(January 1998) ... Wins EWA (Eastern Wrestling Alliance) heavyweight title from Rick Fuller.
(1999) ... MTV films "True Life: I'm a Pro Wrestler."
(September 2000) ... Wins NWA

Tri-State (West Virginia) heavyweight title from J.W Idol.
(April 1, 2006) ... Inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame.
(July 1, 2007) ... Signs a contract as "Goodwill Ambassador" for the WWE.
(July 8, 2008) ... Signs a talent contract with WWE and begins managing Mark Henry.
(September 2009) ... Tony becomes the sidekick on The Abraham Washington Show.
(April 20, 2010) ... Tony gets his release from the WWE.
(August 1, 2010) ... Tony becomes a free agent.

Testimonials

Tony was one hell of an athlete. His workouts were unreal. Even when he was on the road, he never missed a day's training. One month after our first meeting, he was almost twice the size he was when we met. I always knew Tony would do great things in the wrestling business. In fact, we had so much confidence in him that he became the first person we ever paid to train to be a wrestler. He had a great personality and he really got over with the fans.

George Scott
Booker for Jim Crockett Promotions, Georgia Championship Wrestling, and the World Wrestling Federation

Most of our family has been separated, but I'm glad Tony and I have stayed in touch and remained good friends through the years. I was older than Tony, but he was always my hero. I'll never forget

the day when the neighborhood bully tried to take a snow shovel from our yard. The guy was 17 years old, weighed 235 pounds, and picked on kids smaller than he was. He was scared of our older brother Norris and me, but we weren't around. When he picked on Tony and tried to take the shovel, he got a surprise. Tony was only 12 years old and weighed less than 130 pounds, but he didn't back down. He said, "You can't take that," and proceeded to break the guy's nose with a hard right jab. Even today, I have nothing but the highest admiration and respect for Tony. He's a good man who would give the shirt off his back to someone in need. He's also very forgiving, even to those who have done him wrong. And when I would get down, he would always remind me of what our mother used to say: "Don't let yesterday's sorrows spoil tomorrow.&quoit;

Charles White

Tony Atlas' older brother

Chapter 1
Tony James-Caswell-McDuffy-White

There are a lot of things about my childhood I don't know because there are no records, and the lack of those records has caused a lot of confusion in my family. For instance, my mother's last name was James, my grandmother was a Caswell, and my father was McDuffy. Those are three good names I would have been proud to have, and yet, my last name is White because that was the last name of my father's biological father.

Confused? Me, too.

Apparently, my grandmother got pregnant by a man with the last name of McDuffy before she married my grandfather, whose last name was White. My grandfather never knew he wasn't my father's biological son and raised him as his own, even though my grandmother listed my father as

Norris McCoy McDuffy White on his birth certificate. He was what we would call mulatto: half-white, half-black.

I had four brother and four sisters. Norris, Jr. was the oldest. The next three were the triplets: three girls. That should have been enough for my mother, but for her next go-around, she dropped twins: Sherman and Shirley. After she gave birth to my brother Charles, I came along. I was born in Clifton Forge, Virginia on April 23, 1954. I was followed two years later by my youngest brother, Walter.

I don't know how old Norris is, but there is only a year or so between each of the children. In the 1950s, if a woman wanted to have sex, there was a good chance she would get pregnant. There were no birth control programs to speak of, and even if there were, my mother wouldn't have been able to afford it. Being born in a hospital wasn't an option for a black baby back then, either. Segregation was still the rule of the land, and the hospitals

catered strictly to the whites, so like most black people, I was delivered at home by a midwife.

Normally, after a black child was born, the parents would go to the hospital and report the information about the birth. The attendant would ask the parents to write down the information, and then the hospital would issue the parents a birth certificate. The problem was the parents would do the best they could to write down the information, but most of them couldn't read or write. Your mother's last name might be Brown, but when she filled out the application, she wrote down Jones. As a result, you had to go through your whole life answering to the name Jones, even though your parents' name was Brown.

The education system wasn't geared towards helping blacks get an education when my mother was young. The education they received in high school in the 1930s was at or below the level of what the sixth-grade students were learning in the 1960s. I remember showing my mother my

homework one afternoon. She said, "Oh, I remember this. I learned this in high school."

I said, "Mom, this is the sixth grade."

"Hey, mom!"

The kids in the big metropolitan areas—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago—got a pretty good education, especially in the northern states. Richmond had a good school system, but the small towns like Low Moor, where my mother grew up, had no desire to teach black children, or to give them the opportunity being given to the whites.

Roanoke was one of the larger cities in Virginia, so they had a good education system, but when I was in school, a small town like Clifton Forge didn't have the resources or personnel to teach us what we needed to know to prepare us for life in the world.

I'll never forget the oldest kid in my sixth-grade

class. He was a farm kid whose parents often pulled him out of school to work on the farm. He would return in the winter, and then leave again in the spring. He was 21 years old when he finally graduated from junior high to high school.

When I was two or three years old, we moved to Low Moor, Virginia, a small town located between Clifton Forge and Covington. We lived there until I was 11 years old.

My mother's name was Beatrice James. I have to give a lot of credit to my mother because she did her best to provide for us. She wasn't home very much. From seven o'clock in the morning until two in the afternoon, she worked as a cook at the Hotel Roanoke. The hotel, built in 1882 during a time when Roanoke was known as Big Lick, was closed in 1989, but restorations began in 1993 and it re-opened in 1995 as the Hotel Roanoke and Conference Center.

Each day after work, my mother came home for a

few minutes to make sure we hadn't burned the house down, and then went to the hospital at three o'clock to work as a maid. At eleven o'clock at night, she left work and returned home. Those were long hours, and for many of those years, she brought home a grand total of $30 a week.

A lot of people had trouble making a living in those days. I'm not just talking about the black folks. The white folks did, too. However, my mother had two strikes against her. She was black and she was a woman. In addition to that, she was a single woman. It wasn't so much the fact that she was a black woman. In fact, a single black woman had it a little bit better than a single white woman. At least a black woman could get a job as a maid or a cook. It didn't matter what kind of work it was. You could find work. White women, on the other hand, just about had to be married to get by in the world. There weren't many white women who could do the hard work of a maid or cook, much less be willing to do that kind of work. The employers wanted the big, scrapping,

black women.

The terms big, scrapping, and black describe my mother to a T. She stood 5-foot-8 and weighed more than 300 pounds. That's why everybody called her Big B. Her name was Beatrice, but they called her Big B.

We didn't live at the poverty level. We lived below it. If you've never been in that situation, you can't begin to imagine what it was like. For one thing, our house consisted of only two rooms, so there wasn't any privacy. Four boys, my mother, and my grandmother all lived in that house. I remember my mother, my grandmother, and my baby brother, all having to sleep in the same bed.

We didn't have an indoor bathroom, either. For several years, we went to the bathroom in a bucket we kept under the bed. After we finished, we had to go outside and dump it. One morning, I woke up and accidentally put my foot in the bucket, sending

the contents out onto the floor. My grandmother never said much, but she did that morning. "You clean that up, right now!"

We knew we had finally arrived when we got our own outhouse, but with nine kids living in the house, it filled up fast. Every year, we had to dig a new hole in a different spot in the yard and move the outhouse over it. Twelve months later, we had to dig another hole, place the outhouse over it, and fill the old hole with dirt.

We didn't have a heating system in our house, so in the winter, we would occasionally make a fire in the stove just to stay warm. We didn't know how to clean out the soot and ashes, so after the first week, the chimney would be stopped up and the stove wouldn't work. My mother didn't have time to keep it working properly, so we just bundled up and wore more clothes. And as cold as that house was in the winter, it was just as hot in the summer.

I spent my childhood living the life of a refugee, sleeping on box springs on the floor in a corner of my bedroom. Years later, when I stayed in a hotel for the first time, I was absolutely amazed at the luxury of it all. "These beds all have sheets and blankets? Wow! That's really nice!"

When Mother would get off work at night, she would bring food for the family. The meal at eleven o'clock at night was our one and only meal of the day. We didn't have dishes. She would hand each of us a sheet of newspaper and put our food on it. We didn't need silverware, either. We just dug in with our hands and ate like animals.

As bad as things were, we weren't resentful of the lifestyle we had to lead. We didn't know there was any other way of life. Regardless of what it was, we were just happy to have something to eat.

Low Moor had one store which was called a commissary. The store was owned by the Low Moor Iron Company, but their prices were

reasonable. It was a combination of a Wal-Mart and convenience store, only it wasn't as nice and they didn't sell much more than food, clothing, and household necessities. My mother bought everything there. At the beginning of the year, we got one pair of shoes, two pairs of pants, two shirts, and a package of underwear and socks. That was it for the year. When we got home from school, we took off our school clothes, hung them up, and put on our play clothes.

One night, when I was about four years old, my dad came home drunk. All he brought home for dinner was fatback bacon and a sack of beans. He went right back out and used the remainder of his money to go drinking, gambling, and whoring around town. When my mother came home, she looked into the cabinet and discovered the bacon and beans. She was furious. She said, "Wash those beans, boys," and began throwing firewood into the kitchen stove.

It was the middle of July and the house itself felt

like an oven. Norris said, "Mom! It's hot!"

"Shut up, boy, and clean those beans!"

We cleaned the beans.

When my dad walked through the door about an hour later, my mother began to scream at him. The next thing I know, we heard something fall against the kitchen wall. A few seconds later, it was my dad who was doing the hollering and screaming. When we opened the kitchen door, we were shocked by what we saw. Mom had him laying backwards on the hot stovetop and flames were licking up his sides. When my mother let him go, he ran out the kitchen door.

That wasn't the end of things, though. My mother stormed by us, pulled out her .38 revolver from under her bed, and ran out the back door. Dad, of course, was long gone.

My father and mother separated when I was about two years old. They didn't separate because they

didn't get along. My father wanted to move to Richmond, Virginia, where he had been offered a job with the Phillip Morris Company. At the time, there weren't any jobs in Low Moor. The only industry was the railroad, which is where my grandfather worked, and even if you could land a job working for them, the jobs didn't pay very well. The plan was my dad would go to Richmond, and my mother would join him there when he got established. However, my mother was a small-town girl who didn't want to move to the "big city." My grandmother, who was living with us and surviving on my grandfather's railroad pension, didn't want to move, either. Even if my mother had been willing to move to Richmond, she wasn't about to move without her. She recognized the fact that grandma had raised her, so she was going to pay her back by taking care of her in her old age.

When dad left, Norris, Charles, Walter, and I stayed behind with my mother. We were chosen to stay with my mother because we could work and

help her run the household. My dad would have left Sherman, as well, but they didn't want to separate the twins. My mother and father had plans to get back together, eventually, but I wouldn't see him again until I was 12 years old.

My father had good intentions when he took the triplets and the twins to Richmond, but that arrangement didn't last long because he worked long hours. When the Social Services people were told five young children were being left alone at home, they took the kids and put them up for adoption. In those days, the State could take kids from their families whenever they wanted, without having to go through a lot of legal proceedings.

That was the last time I saw Sherman and my sisters. I have no memory of them at all, and there are no pictures. In fact, my mother didn't even know where they were. She tried her best to find them and get them back, but the government wouldn't release the information. In those days, the courts were set up to protect adoptive parents'

privacy, and they refused to give any information to the birth parents regarding the whereabouts of the adopted children. If they had computers like we do now, we might have been able to track them down, but there's no way to do the research. I would be surprised if those records even exist, and even if the records were available, where would we have begun to look? We didn't even know our real names!

I don't know much about Norris' history because we took separate paths and we lost track of each other, but I do know two things about him. He was intelligent and he was one hell of a fighter. Even as a kid, he was interested in self-defense. Kung Fu was his main interest and his hero was Bruce Lee. We called him Dadoo, which we somehow derived from the words Kung Fu. At the age of 15, he went into the Job Corps. When he returned home, he had my mother sign papers which gave him permission to join the military, and made a career for himself in the Army. Norris still lives in Roanoke, as does my brother, Charles.

When I was a kid, Walter and I spent a lot of time together. My mother would tell me, "Tony, you're older than Walter, so you take care of him." That was easier said than done because Walter always found ways to get into trouble. To make matters worse, when he got into trouble, my older brothers and I always got the blame. I think part of Walter's downfall was he never had to take responsibility for things he did. Whenever he got into a fight, which was just about every day, one of us would have to stand up for him. If he got into trouble, my mother would whip one of us, rather than him. Walter was hot-headed like my dad, and of the four boys in our family, Walter is the only person in my family to do time in prison. He was convicted of killing somebody. Years later, he told me he killed people in prison to protect his manhood. Part of Walter's problem was that he wasn't a big guy. He was the runt of the litter. Norris, Charles, and myself all stand more than six feet tall, but Walter was just 5-foot 10.

One day, when I was 12 years old, my mother

told me, "Your father is coming home, so you need to clean up the yard." While I was doing that, a man we called Tippy Tom was talking to us. He said, "Do you know who that man over there is?" and pointed to a man standing on the sidewalk.

I knew the answer immediately. "That's my dad," I said.

My brothers and I ran over to him and he gave each of us a PayDay candy bar. He was dressed in fine clothes. My mother used to say, "He can afford to buy fancy suits and wing-tipped shoes, but he can't afford to send me twenty bucks to help with his kids." She was always saying things like that about him, and she was completely justified because he did nothing to help the family.

My dad stayed with us for a while after that, but there was a lot of discord in our home because my dad was a bit of a womanizer. "A bit" might be an understatement if what he told my mother was true. He said he had fathered 36 kids before he

met her. It's strange to think I might have more than 30 siblings scattered across the country. I remember somebody saying my dad was having sex with a woman named Anna Hayes. It was probably true because my mother would get into fights with her. Back then, women would actually fight over a man, and the men seemed to enjoy watching the women fight over them.

My dad left for the final time right after I turned 12 years old, and I didn't see him again until I was 21.

By that time, I was in the wrestling business, wrestling as Tony Atlas White. One day, he saw my name in the newspaper, so he called my mother and asked if it was me. Mom said, "Yeah, that's your boy."

My dad went to the Richmond Coliseum and asked George Scott if he could see me. George came into the dressing room and said, "There's a man out there who says he's your father." When I

walked out and saw him standing there, I recognized him instantly. I pressured him for answers as to why he left the family, but he never gave me a satisfactory explanation. He told me about his life and the hardships he had faced. "You'll never be able to understand the problems your mother and I faced. Times were hard, and I did what I had to do."

He did tell me that in the 1960s, a black man living in rural parts of the country had to kiss ass constantly. My dad was an ex-soldier and a street fighter, and he had a lot of pride, so he couldn't live under those conditions. Instead, he chose to move to Richmond, where people treated a black man with more respect. He said he tried to get my mother to move, but she always refused, in part because of her loyalty to my grandmother. My dad once told me, "I didn't want your grandmother to live with us, but that's what your mom wanted, so I chose to do the right thing."

My mother gave me a different perspective on his

noble motives. "Your dad let your grandmother live with us for one reason, and for one reason only … your grandfather had worked for the railroad and she got a pension check."

He came to visit me several times when I was wrestling in Richmond. We would stand in the back of the building and talk, and over time, we became good friends. However, he never wanted to talk about the past. When we had dinner together, he would offer to pay for my meal, but I would say, "No, Dad. I'll take care of that."

One night, when he hadn't shown up at the Richmond Coliseum for several weeks, I called his house. His wife told me, "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but your dad passed away last month. We tried to get in touch with you. Your father told us you were the one he wanted to see the most."

My brothers always held a grudge against him, and I can't really say I blame them. Being abandoned by your own father is a tough thing to

accept. My mother once told us, "No matter how bad he was, he's still your father. You should treat him with respect." I was the only child who didn't harbor ill feelings towards him. Norris refused to talk to him. When Walter was getting into trouble, my dad took him in and let him live with him. When they got into an argument, Walter tried to beat him up, so my dad kicked him out. "I had to let him go," my dad told me. "He tried to kill me."

Chapter 2
Redeye Hinton

I'm not exaggerating when I say times were tough and life was hard when I was a child. And yet, as poor as we were, my mother refused to accept welfare. As a devout Christian who believed what the Bible taught, she thought a person should pull their own weight in the world. The Bible says you should work by the sweat of your brow and my mother believed that.

One of the things we were expected to do, even as young children, was to find work and contribute something to the family. There was always people who needed to have work done. When I lived in Clifton Forge, the work that needed to be done was usually yard work, or moving things. We also had something called the sewer pond, which required periodic cleaning. We cleaned chicken coops and barns. We shoveled manure. I took jobs at the bowling alley: picking up trash in the parking lot, or washing the bowling pins and bowling balls. We would go to the homes of elderly people and offer to weed their rose garden, trim their bushes, or mow their lawn. Everybody wanted to push the lawn mower, but nobody wanted to do the work that required us to get down onto our hands and knees, and crawl all the way around the house, pulling weeds and shearing long grass which grew along the borders of the flower beds.

Most of the time, it was easy for a strong black man to find work. I would walk down the street and people would yell out, "Hey, boy! You wanna

make a dollar or two?" I always answered, "Yeah." I didn't care what the work entailed. Our family needed the money, and I was willing to do whatever it took to make that money. It wasn't like it is today, when the employer is required to pay a minimum wage. In those days, we didn't know how much we were going to be paid. We just did the jobs and accepted what we were given. Most of the time, the pay was appropriate for the job.

We weren't always paid in hard currency. A lot of horse trading went on in Low Moor. For instance, one of the farmers would come to our house and tell our mother he needed us to help pick tomatoes. That's just an example. He might have wanted us to plant his crops, clean out his livery stable, or just do odd jobs. At the end of the day, he'd say, "You boys gather up some of them tomatoes and take them home to your mother." That was the country folks way of paying their hired help. Today, we call it the barter system. If a man owned a chicken farm, we might clean out the chicken roost. When we finished, he

would give us several dozen eggs. One time, I helped a man slaughter hogs. He said, "Son, go in there and grab one of them hams and take it home to your mother."

There were times, however, when we had problems getting paid. One day, we went to work for old Redeye Hinton and his two sons, Harold and Ron Hinton. I'll never forget those rascals. We spent an entire day clearing Redeye Hinton's hayfield. At the end of the day, we waited around for our pay. We would have been happy to be paid in food, but people often gave us a pair of blue jeans, a shirt, or a pair of shoes (all used, of course). We didn't own much, so we would have been happy with anything, but Redeye didn't give us a thing. Instead, Harold and Ron chased us away by throwing rocks at us. We immediately began to run, but me, being the type of person I am, stopped after a few yards and picked up a rock. When I turned around to throw it, Harold turned tail and ran. I launched that rock with every ounce of my strength and hit him square

in the middle of his back.

The next day, Harold came over to the playground at the rear of our church, where most of the black kids spent their free time. He wanted to even the score and launched himself at me. In seconds, Harold and I were locked in combat. A few seconds later, Ron Hinton jumped on me. I remember hearing somebody in the background say, "Wow! He's beatin' both of 'em."

When I heard that, I went to town. I was feeling my oats. It didn't take long before they took off running. Everybody was patting me on the back.

"Oh, man. You should be a fighter like Joe Louis."

"You should get into sports."

"You're pretty good with your hands."

They were really bragging about me. I felt like a million bucks to have such respect coming to me

from the people in the neighborhood. I was due that respect, too. Harold and Ron were at least 14 years old, while I was only 10. Within a few hours, everybody in town was talking about it. When you did something extraordinary in a small town like Low Moor, the word would spread until everybody knew about it. Old man Hinton, of course, wasn't too happy about his boys being the laughing stock of the town, especially when they had been beaten by a black kid who was much younger than they were.

The next day, when I was walking to the commissary, Redeye Hinton walked up to me and said, "Hey, we're sorry about what happened the other day. I'd like you to help me clear another hayfield."

He owned another, smaller hayfield. I admit I was pretty gullible because I believed what he said. I went to his farm, hauled the hay, and did everything he asked. When we finished, he rode up to me on his tractor. His entire tone and attitude

changed from what it had been earlier that day. "Hey, boy! What went on with you and my boys? I heard you jumped on my boys when they weren't lookin'. Let me see how you do in a fair fight!"

He finished with, "If ya know what's good for ya, ya better not fight back." Then to his boys, he said, "All right, boys. Get 'im."

The two Hinton bastards began flailing away at me, right there in the middle of the hayfield. After I let them get in one or two shots apiece, I told old man Hinton, "Okay, they got even." He just laughed. When they kept firing shots at me, I began to hit back. As soon as I did, old man Hinton jumped down off the tractor and stuck me in the back with his pitchfork.

The funny thing about it, there was 20 to 30 black people standing out in that hayfield, none of whom got involved because they were scared to death. That didn't keep them from watching,

though. Suddenly, all of the respect I had the day before was gone. Instead of being respected for beating up two guys at once, I was looked on as a troublemaker, and I was bringing trouble to the neighborhood.

"I knew no good would come of that boy."

"They're gonna burn us out."

"They're gonna hang us all."

Their comments went on and on. Now, everybody was mad at me because I was causing trouble.

There was one good thing that came from the incident. After word got around about it, nobody wanted to mess with me. I had unintentionally made a reputation for myself as somebody who could take care of himself, and that reputation was an asset for me because fighting was a way of life in our neighborhood.

Most kids today are pampered by their parents, who are afraid to discipline their kids when they act out or talk back. My mother never kissed my butt. She whipped it when I stepped out of line. If she told me to do something and I acted like I wasn't paying attention, she would look at me and say, "Don't make me tell you again, boy." And she meant what she said. She didn't repeat herself, so you had better be listening carefully whenever she spoke to you. Whenever we disobeyed, we got a whipping. There wasn't any such thing as "time out" in our house. The closest thing we had to "time out" was "time out" to heal.

My grandmother, who was in her nineties when I was a child, just sat in her rocking chair and sang hymns all day long. She would occasionally tell us to do something, but she was so old she couldn't make us do anything we didn't want to do. She couldn't stop us from doing what we wanted to do, either.

My mother, on the other hand … she was like

E.F. Hutton. When she talked, we listened.

One of the ladies in town grew flowers in a hot house and sold them to the locals. One day, while we were working for her, she left to run a few errands. Her son, who was about the same age as me, 11 years old, took her absence as an invitation to aggravate us. He kept hitting us with a small horsewhip that his mother had bought for him. "Get to work, you lazy niggers," he'd say. "Get to work."

The first few times he hit me, I ignored him, but I finally said, "If you hit me one more time, I'm gonna go get your mom."

He said, "You big crybaby. Go get my mom." Then he hit Charles, who left to get the mother. I had a bit of a temper when I was a kid. When he hit me again, I took the shoestrings out of my shoes, tied them together, and used them like a whip. I put him face down on the ground and whipped him until he began to cry. Of course, just

as I was beginning to feel some satisfaction, Charles showed up with the kid's mother in tow. She pulled me off her son and walked me home. My mother gave me a whipping with a belt when the lady told her what I had done.

One day, when I was about 10 years old, we were walking down the sidewalk. A man stepped out from a doorway and threateningly stood in front of her. My mother stepped back and said, "You boys get out of the way."

The man weighed a solid 200 pounds. He was drunk and, evidently, hoped to have his way with her. In the neighborhood, especially in the rural areas, if you were black, it wouldn't do any good to call the cops. The only time the cops came into my neighborhood was if a black man did something to a white man. They didn't waste their time trying to control black-on-black crimes. My mother knew instantly that she would have to defuse the situation herself. As I said earlier, my mother weighed more than 300 pounds. She looked at the

man and calmly said, "You're too tall, so I can't go over ya. You're too wide, so I can't go around ya. You're too low, so I can't go under ya. I guess if I'm gonna get these chiluns home, I just gotta go through ya."

She hit that man so hard it sounded like a firecracker going off. She hit him several times before he tried to fight back. The next thing I knew, she had him up across her right shoulder and ran him into the brick wall of a building. When he hit the ground, she kicked him in the ribs. She stood there looking down at him, breathing hard. When she turned to look at us, she scared the hell out of me. Her eyes were blood red. She calmly said, "You boys come on."

If we got into a fight, my mother would make it her business to find out who we were fighting. Her second question was always, "Did you win?"

If you said, "No, I got beat up," she would say, "I want you to go out there and fight 'em again. If you

lose, then tomorrow, you gotta fight ‘em again. You keep fightin’ him every day, until you whoop him." Then she would personally take us to wherever that person was.

My mother knew she wouldn’t always be around to fight our battles for us. For one thing, she worked from seven o’clock in the morning until eleven o’clock at night. Every time I see a 7-Eleven store, I think about my mother, because those were the hours she worked. My mother would always say, "I can’t protect you kids because I won’t always be here when you get into trouble, so you have to learn how to protect yourself."

I had my first knock-down, drag-out fight when I was 11 years old, against a guy who was 19. We fought almost every day for a month. The first time, though, he gave me a good pounding. When I was able to break free, I ran from him. When I got home, my mother took one look at me and said, "Who did it?"

I thought, "All right. My mother's gonna get that guy. She'll whoop his ass. He'll know better than to jump on me the next time."

I puffed out my chest and strutted down the street beside my mother. When we reached a group of guys on the street corner, she asked, "Where is he at?"

I pointed and said, "He's the one over there with no shirt on."

Her brow furrowed as she said, "That tall, skinny guy?"

"Yes, m'am."

"Go get him."

"What?"

She said, "I want you to jump on him. If you don't whip him today, I want you to jump on him tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day, until

you beat him."

I did what she said. That happened every day for several weeks, until one day, when I went to fight him, the guy said, "Okay, you win."

From that day on, I did a lot of fighting. It was a way of life in my neighborhood. In those days, even the cops loved nothing better than to get into a fight with a perp. They weren't worried about threats of lawsuits. We had big, rough, Irish cops who prayed for some drunk to say something like, "You take that badge and gun off and I'll kick your ass." When that happened to a cop, he would calmly remove the badge from his uniform, take the gun from his holster, and hand them to his partner. After that, you had better be prepared to back up your words with action because the cops would beat the hell out of you.

The toughest guy in our neighborhood was Harold Reynolds. Harold was the best when it came to street fighting. He wasn't afraid of anybody. One

night, Harold Reynolds got shot in the stomach five times. He got out of the hospital before the guy who shot him did.

I locked up with Harold one day in the park. It was just a friendly skirmish. Harold tried to put me on the ground, but he couldn't do it. He looked at me and said, "Boy, a lot of people are gonna be surprised when they grab ahold of you. If they only knew how strong you were, they would never say anything to you."

Two things came out of that encounter. From that day on, nobody wanted to cross paths with me, and I had no fear of any man.

I want to stop here and say you're going to think some of the stories I tell about my childhood are made up, but every word is true. At times, when I'm not quite sure about my memory, I'll call my brother Charles, and he'll either verify my story or set me straight on the way it really was.

Today, most of the gangbangers use guns and knives. In my neighborhood, we had a few guys who went to the guns or knives, but most of the guys were physical. I used to hang out with a man named J.C. Williams. He was kind of like a father to me. One night, a bodybuilder and weightlifter came into the bar where J.C. spent a lot of his time and called J.C. an "old man." J.C. said, "You come outside with me, son, and I'll show you what an old man can do to your ass." The kid was about 25 years old, but 57-year-old J.C. beat the hell out of him without so much as breaking a sweat.

I remember another great street fighter named Buck Nelson. We used to hang out with him when we were kids. Buck got stabbed and cut several times during fights, but he never lost a fight.

The wrestling coach at Fleming High School was another man who had my respect. A man used to bring a baby gorilla to town with the carnival. They couldn't do it now because of the animal-rights activists, but at the time, if you paid a

one-dollar entry fee, and you could stay in the ring with the gorilla for a certain number of minutes, you would win $100. Coach Miller took the bet. When he got into the ring, he beat the hell out of that poor animal. The owner said, "Get him out of there before he kills my monkey!"

After that day, whenever we talked about him, we referred to him as Killer Miller, or Killer Gorilla Miller.

We locked horns one day in the park. At the time, coaches didn't want athletes to lift weights. They thought it would make us "muscle-bound." Coach Miller didn't realize how strong I was, so when we locked up, I put him down pretty quickly. Of course, most of the tough guys wanted to fist fight when they couldn't win a wrestling match. Coach Miller began to come at me, but we both cooled down and talked about what had happened. He always had my respect. He was a big guy: about 6-foot-3 and 275 pounds. He had huge hands. When he met you, he would hit you in the

chest as hard as he could. That was his way of saying, "Hello."

The last time I saw Killer was in the year 2006. He must have done well in life because he was driving a Jaguar. He had heard I was going to be signing autographs at a store in town. A few hours before the signing, one of my old classmates stopped by the store with our high school yearbook. He wanted me to sign it, but he was in a hurry and had to leave, so he left the book with the store owner and asked him to have me sign my [amateur] wrestling pictures. I was coming back a month later, so I asked the promoter to ask my old classmate if he would make me copies of the pages from the yearbook. When I returned a month later, the promoter handed me copies of the wrestling pictures and told me the guy had just left them. I asked, "Where's the guy at?"

"He wasn't feeling well," he explained, "so he went home."

"Well, give him a call and tell him what hotel I'm staying at. Maybe he can come by tonight."

Later that night, I got a phone call from the promoter. He told me the guy hadn't been feeling good, so he had gone home to take a nap while he waited for me to get to the store. An hour or so after he got home, he died. That was so sad. The last thing my classmate had done before he died was bring me a copy of the yearbook photos.

Back then, as long as we were fist fighting, nobody cared if we were black or white. In fact, one of the ways people made extra money was to bet money on fights. One of the street corners in Low Moor was called Scrappers Corner. It was just a hangout spot where the neighborhood and railroad people could gamble, drink, and carouse. Low Moor was a small town, so there weren't any nightclubs for black people. We could hang out at the park, but the "Corner" was where everybody spent most of their time. My dad would take me down there, and since I was a good fighter in my

younger days, he'd let me fight one of the railroad men. He said, "If you lose, I'm gonna give you a worse whippin' when you get home."

He took me there to fight and put money on the table. Another way to make extra money was shooting dice. Then again, if you happened to win somebody's money, there were times when you'd better be prepared to fight.

I don't gamble, and there's a reason why. One night after dark, we saw a group of men from the neighborhood gathered on a street corner. They were just hanging out: drinking whiskey and shooting dice. I was just a little kid at the time, but we wanted to be grownup and thought it would be cool to hang around them. When one guy dropped a nickel, another man slid his foot over it. The man who dropped the nickel said, "Take your foot off of my nickel."

The other guy said, "I don't know nothin' about no nickel. There's nothin' under my foot."

The first man repeated, "Move your foot off my nickel."

When the man refused to move his foot, the other guy left ... but he came back less than a minute later and shot the man. We immediately took off running, for two reasons. One, we were scared to death, and, two, we weren't supposed to be there. Our mother didn't get home from work until eleven o'clock at night, and our grandmother was old, so we really didn't have anybody to tell us what we could or couldn't do. We knew, however, that we were supposed to be home before dark, and getting involved in a situation like that would surely bring us the wrath of our mother.

The entire incident was caused by an argument over a mere five cents. Later, when they asked the man why he shot the guy, he said, "It wasn't so much the five cents. It was the principle of the thing. He was tryin' to take somethin' from me."

That was the neighborhood. It wasn't the amount

of money. It was the principle.

I don't think the cops ever investigated the incident. In those days, the cops wouldn't dare enter the black neighborhoods at night. They would wait until morning. Black-on-black crime wasn't at the top of their list, which I believe is one of the reasons why black-on-black crime has always been so rampant in the black neighborhoods. The black people knew that as long as we did things to each other, and not the white population, law enforcement would look the other way and let things slide.

Back to the fighting: Whenever we wanted to pick up some money, we would go to the Corner and tell somebody, "I'm a good fighter."

Some guy would say, "I'm gonna put money on you, boy, but don't you lose my money."

A circle would be scratched into the dirt and we would be expected to fight whoever they put in

there with us. It could be a 15-year-old boy against a 30-year-old man, or a 12-year-old boy against a 20-year-old man. It didn't matter. That's how we stayed alive. My brothers, Charles and Norris, were both good fighters. I knew my dad was a good fighter, too, because my mother used to brag about what a tough fighter he was. There was a time when he had the reputation of being unbeatable. That was one of the reasons why she encouraged us to stand up for ourselves. She wanted to make sure her boys were as tough as he was.

Fighting and sports were just about the only things we had to occupy our time when we were kids. We didn't have any money, so we spent most of our time on the basketball court, or slap boxing in the street. Once in awhile, somebody would get boxing gloves for Christmas and we'd spend the whole day boxing. That's all there really was to do.

From age six to about age 18, I fought almost

every day. In the black neighborhood, there were limited ways for a person to get any recognition for himself from his peers. The only road to success for poor black men was through fighting, sports, singing, or dancing. That was just about it. None of us had any thought or hope of going to college. The idea never crossed our minds.

Our teachers even discouraged us from thinking about any career other than sports. For instance, I was a good artist. I could draw a portrait of somebody that looked just like the person. If you ask any of the wrestlers who really know me, they'll tell you, "That Tony Atlas is a hell of an artist." But until I got to high school and they integrated the schools, every teacher I ever knew would tell me, "Oh, you don't want to be an artist. A big boy like you should be a football player."

To most educators, it was inconceivable that a black person had a brain in his head, but that helped us a lot, because they talked in front of us

as if we weren't there. No offense to my white friends, but most white people in those days didn't think black folks understood English. As a result, we were able to learn a lot. I knew very little about the personal business of the black people in my neighborhood, but I knew just about everything there was to know about the whites. They exposed themselves constantly. They assumed I was just too dumb to know what they were saying or doing. That, in turn, gave us a clear understanding about how white people felt about people of color. Today, the Spanish-speaking people are the ones who act like they don't understand English. Many of them don't, but don't be fooled into assuming that.

Regardless of the color of a person's skin, those small, southern towns were tight-knit communities. Everybody seemed to know everybody else, and they did what they could to help each other. On the other hand, the towns were small enough that everybody knew everybody else's business, and everybody was quick to

gossip and judge. My mother and grandmother were both staunch, church-going women. My mother used to quote scripture: "The scriptures say you are not to live with a woman unmarried." When my mother would get into arguments with other women, regardless of the subject of the argument, she would hit them with the old tried-and-true, "Well, at least my kids are all by the same man."

That statement, while it might not actually win the argument, would always end the argument.

Chapter 3
Lobster Tails and Scrambled Eggs

Around the time when I was 12 years old, schools began reporting certain things to the state authorities. One of the teachers reported our living conditions to the Department of Social Services. When they investigated, they discovered

we had no food in the house. As a result, they ordered my mother to send two of her children to the Virginia Negro Baptist Children's Home, where we could be properly raised and taken care of. It was a good decision because my mother really couldn't afford to raise four boys on her own. For instance, we wore the same clothes to school all week long, and we slept in them at night. I smelled so bad that the other kids at the school in Low Moor didn't want to sit near me.

My mother didn't want Walter to go because he was the baby, and Norris was in the Job Corps, so Charles and I were chosen. Charles ran away shortly after we arrived at the Home. When the authorities found him, they let him return home. I could have done the same, but I chose to stay. I didn't want to go back home. For the first time in my life, I was getting three square meals a day and sleeping on a mattress.

Believe it or not, I took the first bath of my life when I arrived at the orphanage. When I walked

into the dormitory, the house mother said, "You stink worse than a polecat! The first thing you're gonna do is get in the shower and wash that filth off." The other kids all laughed. One of them said, "There's so much mud and dirt on him, he'll clog up the drain."

They put me in the bathtub and all the boys held me down while the house mother washed me. She was surprised when she finished. She said, "You're not as black as I thought you were. Now that we've washed off all that nasty dirt, we see that you're brown-skinned."

The shower wasn't the only "first" I experienced that day. When the kids complained about my bad breath, the house mother made me brush my teeth and drink a cup of Listerine, and when I finished showering, she combed my hair. That was the part of the Home I hated the most. Black people don't have straight hair like most white people do. They have coarse, kinky hair. Mine was coarse, kinky, and matted, making combing an almost unbearable

form of torture. The word "painful" doesn't begin to describe the combing process.

To a poor, black kid from Low Moor, however, being sent to the orphanage was like dying and going to heaven.

We got up at five o'clock in the morning. The Home, which was run by the Baptist churches of Virginia, sat on 600 acres of farm land, so there was a lot of work to do before the eight o'clock breakfast. The first thing we did when we woke up in the mornings was shower and make up our beds. After that, we had to line up like soldiers so they could march us outside to feed the cows, chickens, mules, and ponies. That was the first time I had any interaction with animals. We had a big bull named Twinkie. We had to slop the hogs. We let the cows out to pasture so they could visit the water hole, but we didn't have to round them up in the late evening. They instinctively knew when it was time to come home.

At nine o’clock, after breakfast, we were each expected to do whatever chore was assigned to us. Most of the time, I was given the chore of plowing with the mules. We had two mules: Old Tom and Suzie-Q. One day, Mr. Harris told me to get Tom, but warned me to put blinders on him before I hooked him up to the plow. "If he sees it, you won’t get a lick of work out of him all day long."

I didn’t pay any attention to what Mr. Harris said, and as soon as I hooked Tom to the plow, he began to limp, as if something was wrong with his leg. I said, "Mister Harris! Tom is limping!"

"Did you put the blinders on him?"

"No, sir," I answered.

"I should whip you for that, but I won’t. I’ll give you another chance. Unhook Tom, then hook up Suzie-Q. We won’t get any work out of Tom today."

When Tom limped out of the barn, Mr. Harris said, "Let me show you something."

While Tom limped out to the pasture, we walked into the barn and peeked out of a window. I was shocked by what I saw. Tom was strutting around the pasture as if nothing was wrong. "Now walk out into the field," said Mr. Harris. When I walked out of the barn, Tom immediately began to limp. I learned a lot about mules that day. I always thought they were stupid. Anybody who uses the expression "dumb as a mule" has never been around a mule! Old Tom knew exactly what to do to get out of work.

The next day, when I went to put the blinders on Tom, he leaned against me, pinning me to the wall. Mr. Harris was watching because he wanted to see what I was doing, so he said, "Go to the other side! He's trying to stop you from putting the blinders on." I finally got Tom out into the field, but he fought me, and he seemed to laugh at me all day long.

I never minded the hard work at the Baptist Children's Home. That probably sounds weird because kids don't normally like to work, but I was what you might call a day-dreamer. When I worked, I dreamed about getting bigger and stronger. I was always thinking about building my muscles. People would always compliment me on my physique, and I wasn't used to that. As a child, I was always being put down. People would say, "Look at Tony's muscles. Why don't you work out and be like him?" Hearing people say things like that made me work harder.

I experienced so many "firsts" while I was living at the Home. People would donate animals to the farm. One of them was a boxer named Duke. When he came to the Home, he was still a puppy. He had big, round eyes. I never had a dog before, but we bonded instantly and Duke became mine. It was like we were meant to be together. I ran up to Duke and said to the supervisor, "This is my dog."

He said, "No, Tony. He belongs to everybody."

I disagreed. "No, this is my dog."

The supervisor said, "Tony, if you want that dog to be yours, you have to be responsible for him. You have to make sure he stays healthy. You have to feed and water him every day, and you'll have to give him a bath."

I was willing to do anything to keep Duke as my own. Duke was a lot like my brother, Walter, but with a better personality. He seemed to appreciate me taking care of him, and in turn, Duke would protect me whenever he thought somebody was going to hurt me. When I would get into a fight, the hair on Duke's back would bristle and he would stand up. I would say, "No, Duke. This is my fight."

About six or seven months after I got Duke, he got into a fight with two German Shepherds. He died later when his injuries got infected. The

supervisors knew how upset I was when he died, so they gave me the day off from work. I loved Duke so much I never wanted another dog after that.

Every Christmas, the people at a local church drew names of the boys in the Home. Whoever drew our name would buy us a present. That was my first memory of really enjoying the Christmas holidays.

I also learned about homosexuality while I was in the Home. The supervisors called a meeting one day and told us about a guy named John Thomas who would be coming to live in the Home. They didn't go into detail about John being a homosexual, or explain what that meant. They simply told us he was different from the rest of us, and that we should treat him as if he were no different from anybody else. Those words fell on deaf ears, though. Several of the kids teased him constantly, calling him "sicko," "fag," and other derogatory names. The teasing got so bad that John

stayed in the dormitory during the day.

There was a linen closet in the dormitory where the sheets, pillow cases, and towels were kept. One Sunday afternoon after church, the house mom pointed to the closet door and asked me, "Who locked this door?" I didn't know. "The window is open," she said. "Go around to the side of the building, crawl in through the window, and unlock this door."

I did as I was told. When I looked through the window, I was shocked by what I saw. Four or five kids had the gay kid on his stomach, with his pants down around his ankles, and they were on top of him. I scrambled in through the window and pushed them away. Surprisingly enough, they were the same kids who always talked about how much they hated homosexuals, or "queers," as we called them in those days. When I confronted the ringleader of the group, he said, "You're only queer if you're on the bottom."

I stood there thinking, "I don't think so." They all begged me not to tell on them. I really wanted to spread the story through the whole school, but it only would have made things worse for John Thomas, so I let them sneak out through the window while John pulled up his pants. When we opened the closet door, John told the woman he didn't know the door was locked. I don't know what she was thinking, but it was obvious she didn't believe him.

I learned one thing from that incident. If you put a bunch of boys together, each of them filled with those raging hormones, somebody is going to pop somebody. If a girl is in the mix, they will try to mess with her, but when you eliminate the girl, a smaller boy will be the next best thing. If a young boy tends to be on the effeminate side, the rugged boys are going to mess with him. That's the problem with putting young kids together in a closed situation like a juvenile home, or an orphanage. It's almost worse than a prison because the young kids don't realize what they're

doing is wrong, and if nobody says anything about it, they'll continue to do it over and over.

I was too much of a jock to get into homosexuality. In fact, before I turned 15 years old, I could have cared less about having sex. I was 16 before a woman named Loretta broke my cherry. That's why I was so proud of my shoe fetish. I'll explain that in more detail later, but when I was a kid, I was happy just fantasizing about women and their shoes. I do remember getting into a fight with a kid over a girl named Jean Allen. The guy was bigger than me, so I made a reputation for myself by standing up to him.

During my time in the Home, I never heard any of the kids complain about anything. The saddest day for a kid in the Home was when they were told they were being sent home. We all came from the same general background: poverty, neglect, and no positive role models. Most of the kids had abusive parents, or came from broken homes.

Unlike the stereotypical orphanages portrayed in the movies, we were well taken care of. In the Children's Home, we ate what we thought was the best food in the whole world … and it was! Those women could really cook. For breakfast, we had eggs, sausage, ham, and pancakes. The man who ran the Home was generous. He always told us to eat as much as we wanted. We wore clean clothes, and we didn't have to wear them to bed. We played baseball. We played with animals. We felt safe and secure.

When I turned 15 years old, I left the Home. My mother was back on her feet and had moved back to Roanoke. At the time, the state provided welfare only long enough to help a person live until they were able to find a good job and take care of themselves. Unfortunately, people today are allowed to live off the state from cradle to grave, which doesn't help them at all. In fact, it allows them to become dependent on others, and doesn't teach them anything about growing and becoming self-dependent. I admire my mother so

much because she accepted welfare only until she could financially support her children on her own.

When I walked into the house, she was so happy to see me. She always felt guilty about sending me away, and she never forgave herself, but she had made the decision out of necessity. I was wise enough to know that it had been for the best and I told her that. Looking back on it, the Baptist Children's Home had been a blessing. The farm work is what laid the foundation for my physique and strength. My body never would have developed like it did. When I went to the orphanage, I stood 6-foot-3 and weighed 138 pounds. When I came home, I weighed 185 pounds of solid muscle.

Soon after returning home, I heard my older brother, Charles, back-talking Mom. When she had left for work early that morning, she told him to clean his room, but when she returned home, it was a mess. When Mother ordered Charles to do what she had told him to do, he gave her lip. I

wanted to show her I had become a responsible man during my time I was gone. "I'll take care of Charles, Mom," I said. I invited Charles to join me outside and we duked it out. After throwing a few punches at each other, we both began to laugh. We went inside and Charles cleaned his room. Later that night, Charles said, "Tony's gotten tough, mom, and he's become a man."

I went to Hurt Park Elementary School in the sixth grade. The following year, I went to Robert E. Lee Junior High School for a few months, but midway through the school year, they closed the school and we were all transferred to James Madison Middle School. While I was at James Madison, several of us were invited to wrestle at Jefferson High. In order to give the coaches an opportunity to help the students learn and prepare for varsity competition, coaches were allowed to bring seventh- and eighth-grade students from the junior high schools to compete on the junior varsity team.

Unfortunately, when I graduated from the eighth

grade, instead of going to Jefferson, I went to Patrick Henry High School. Jefferson was within walking distance of my house, but when the county began to bus students to other schools, I was assigned to Patrick Henry.

The first time I got into serious trouble with the law, it was for something my brother Walter did. He stole a car. He was only 14 years old at the time, so I don't know what he thought he was going to do with it once he had it.

Even though I was the next to the youngest in the family, whenever my mother had to go somewhere, she left me in charge of my brothers. For some reason, she felt I was more mature than my older brothers. I suppose it was due to the structure I had lived under at the Baptist Children's Home. When I came home one afternoon, there was a black DeSoto Convertible sitting in our front yard. It had a white stripe down the side and a black-and-white interior. Walter was the only one home at the time, so I said, "Walter, there's a car

in the front yard. Where did it come from?"

"I stole it," he answered matter-of-factly.

"Oh, Lawd have mercy," I thought. "We're gonna get in trouble."

My first thought was the police would see the car and throw us all into jail. I didn't know how to drive, but I knew I had to return the car before it was discovered. I got behind the wheel, Walter got into the passenger seat, and I drove out into the street. I hadn't driven more than halfway down our block when I ran into the back of a cement truck.

I'm sure you're asking yourself: Tony! How could you possibly run into the back of a truck?

It was easy. I decided that since I was going to drive the car, I might as well roll down the window and act cool, just in case any of my friends might see me driving. Sure enough, I heard somebody yell, "Hey, look! Tony's driving!" I puffed out my chest, got a big grin on my face, and

looked over to see who was watching. That was when the truck stopped in front of me.

My brother's face hit the windshield and he broke his jaw, but that didn't keep him from getting out of the car and running away. For some reason, which I suppose was fear, I decided to run, too. By the time I made it to Hurt Park, something inside me told me I should go back to the scene of the accident … and that's exactly what I did. I got back to the car just as the police arrived. When they got out of their car, they asked, "Who was driving the car?"

My mother used to say there were two kinds of people she didn't like: liars and thieves. In fact, she despised them. "A liar will lie to anybody," she would say, "and a thief will steal from anybody. And when you tell one lie, you have to tell another lie to cover up the first one."

So when the cop asked me who had been driving the car, I said, "I was." I couldn't lie. I knew my

mother would rather see me go to jail then to know I told a lie. That's how strongly she felt about liars.

When the police took me down to the station, they tried to make me tell them who actually stole the car, but I refused to tell on my brother. They finally gave up and the judge sentenced me to probation. I can still hear that man's voice: "Son, you better not get into any more trouble. Go to school and stay off the streets. If you get into trouble again, you're goin' to jail."

Call it a hunch, or mother's intuition, but my mother knew who had stolen the car. She told me she was proud of me for protecting my brother. In a way, hearing praise come from my mother made up for everything I went through.

A few months after that, my mother had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital, leaving me in charge.

Three days later, a boy named Roger Vie broke into a Black Angus steakhouse. Roger was such a good basketball player that he could beat Michael Jordan in a game of one-on-one. On this occasion, however, he stole whole packages of steak and lobster, cartons of eggs, and a lot of other food items. If that was all he had stolen, he probably would have gotten away with it, but he also stole a collection of antique guns. The collection included old muskets from the Civil War, along with the documents and papers that went with them.

My trouble began when he brought the guns to the house. I said, "Wow! Where'd you get these from?"

"I can't tell you that," he hedged. "Just don't tell nobody about 'em."

I was 15 years old, so I should have known better, but what was I going to say when the next thing he said was, "We also got all this food. Do you want some of it?"

If you were living in the ghetto, eating beans and fatback, and a guy showed up on your doorstep with lobster, t-bone steaks, and porterhouse steaks, what would you say? "No, thank you. Take that delicious food somewhere else."

I can't answer for anybody else, but at the time, the only answer that crossed my mind was, "Put it in the fridge."

I had never owned a gun and I didn't like them, so I told him I didn't want the guns. He said, "If you want the food, all you gotta do is hide the guns for awhile."

The next morning, while I was at school, the cops showed up at our front door, evidently having been tipped off that we had the guns. When my brother Charles opened the door, he was holding a huge lobster tail in his hand. He also had three lobster tails on his plate! It didn't take the cops long to put two and two together. "Let's see. These people live in the ghetto, but they eat lobster tails and

scrambled eggs for breakfast."

The cop said to my brother, "I work every day. I wish I could afford lobster for breakfast."

"Ohh, I got a whole refrigerator full of 'em."

"You do?"

"Yeah!"

"Can I see them?"

Charles said, "Yeah, come on in. They're in the fridge."

Charles directed the cop to the refrigerator and sat down to finish his breakfast. When the cop looked into the refrigerator, he saw it was crammed full of boxes of steak and lobster. They had been told about the robbery which took place at the Black Angus on the previous night, so he asked, "Who's in charge of you kids?"

"My brother Tony is."

As soon as I got home from school, the cops arrested me and took me to the Reception and Diagnostic Center in Chesterfield County. I was held there for six months. It was like a reformed school. Like the Baptist Children's Home, the living conditions were better than what I had at home, but the atmosphere wasn't as nice. The worst part about it was being locked up in a small room at night. The daily routine was a lot like the one we followed at the Home. However, unlike the Children's Home, where we worked outdoors in the fresh air, the work at the Diagnostic Center was indoors, and we were closely monitored. There weren't any bars on the windows and doors, but we were watched closely by a supervisor or trustee, who accompanied us everywhere we went.

I was always on my best behavior, so after a few weeks, they made me a trustee. One of my jobs was to bring back kids who tried to leave the

grounds and run away. There weren't any fences around the property, so almost every night, one kid would make an attempt to escape. More often than not, they were spotted before they could leave the property. When they were, somebody would pass the word, and I would run to catch them. Usually, I would have to fight them before they would let me take them back.

One of the benefits of the job was being given special privileges, like being able to walk around unescorted. I was treated like I was an employee. When somebody who tried to run away was re-captured, the supervisors would take everything out of their room, including the mattress, and make them sleep on the concrete floor. We weren't beaten, but we would lose personal items and privileges. One of the privileges I earned was being allowed to lift weights for one hour each day. The Diagnostic Center is where I developed a love for weightlifting, a passion which I hold to this very day.

I was 16 years old when I was released from the Diagnostic Center. One of the conditions of my release was I had to attend school, so I returned to James Madison Middle School to finish the eighth grade. Since I was already 17 years old by the end of the school year, the principal told me he wanted me to skip the ninth grade, so I entered the tenth grade at Patrick Henry High School. That was where my education really began to improve … but in subjects beyond reading, writing, and arithmetic.

A few months after I got out of the Diagnostic Center, I met Loretta Myers. I was still 16 years old, and Loretta was 38. Whenever I walked by her house, she would run out to see me. I always felt funny when I was around her. She would greet me with a big smile and talk with the sweetest-sounding voice. I had an idea of what she wanted, but I could never muster up the courage to ask. One day, I summoned up the nerve to walk over to her house to find out if she had in mind what I thought she did.

I was right. When I walked into the house, she didn't waste any time. She shut the door and pulled off her clothes, right there in her living room. Sitting back on the couch, she spread her legs and said, "Have you ever had any of this yet?" I was so nervous that I turned and ran back outside. The first thing I did was find my buddies and tell them the whole story. "Man, you passed it up? You must be queer or something. If a woman did that to me …"

I thought, Man, I'd better go back and see Loretta. If I don't do her, they'll tell everybody I'm queer. I turned around and marched right back to Loretta's house. As I stood on the top step of her porch, I closed my eyes and summoned up the courage to walk through the door. I jumped when a voice said, "Tony, get your little, brown ass in here." When I opened my eyes to see Loretta standing behind the screen door, I realized there was no turning back. As I walked through the door, I almost breathed a sigh of relief when I noticed she was once again wearing her

clothes. However, as soon as I stepped over the threshold and the door had once again shut behind me, Loretta removed her clothes and laid down on the couch. Self-consciously, I took off my clothes, closed my eyes, and laid down on top of her. I was scared to death. Within 10 seconds, however, I was thinking, "Hey, this ain't too bad."

I'll leave the rest to your imagination.

The next day, I moved in with Loretta. My mother raised holy hell (if there is such a thing). It wasn't necessarily that she was upset because we were having sex. She was angry because we were living together without being married. My mother was a Christian woman who believed that people who live together should be married, and that a man and woman living together unmarried were living in sin. She also thought Loretta was robbing me of my youth.

If that had happened today, there's a good chance Loretta would be in jail. As I said, she was 38,

and I was still a minor. I hear people talk about how we've lost our moral values. In my opinion, people didn't have many moral values back then, either. They just refused to talk about them. John Kennedy and Bill Clinton did a lot of the same things, but we didn't hear people talk much about Kennedy's escapades. And can you imagine what the repercussions would be if the Ted Kennedy-Chappaquiddick incident took place in today's day and age?

I knew a lot of 15- and 16-year-old guys who were living with older women, mostly because the women were getting a welfare check. My mother really didn't have the ability to support four kids. I tried to help when I could, but when I met Loretta, I was only making $60 a week working as a dishwasher. I couldn't support myself on that. I made more money during the summer because I worked a second job as a lifeguard, for which I was paid $100 a week. I also worked a third job at the YMCA, but they didn't pay me. They gave me a free membership. I had to keep the weight

room clean, put the weights back on the racks where they belonged when they weren't in use, sweep the floors, wipe sweat off the walls and the benches, and clean spit off the mirrors. But $160 a week wasn't enough to allow me to rent an apartment of my own. By living with Loretta, I was able to give my mother $50 a week, give Loretta $50 a week, and keep $60 for myself.

Loretta really wasn't a good choice for me, though. She was 38 years old, she had five kids, she didn't have a tooth in her mouth, and every guy in town had been with her. However, she was good to me, and as my first sex partner, I thought I was in love. Years later, I almost married her, but Rufus R. Jones, one of the wrestlers, talked me out of it.

I graduated from high school in 1974 when I was 20 years old. If it hadn't been for the two incidents where I was sent away, I would have finished when I was 17, like my classmates. Even so, graduating late wasn't anything unusual in the black

community. Parents would often take their kids out of school and make them work jobs to help support the family. It wasn't uncommon for an 18-year-old kid to be in a class with sixth graders.

I made my mother proud of me a couple of times in my life. She was really proud of me when I became a professional wrestler, but she said her proudest moment came when I graduated from high school. She raised four boys, and I was the only one who graduated. Charles quit school in the sixth grade. Norris got his GED when he was 15 years old and went from the Job Corps to the Green Berets. I was the only one of her children who finished high school. At the graduation ceremony, she told me, "I never thought I would ever be coming to one of these."

During one of the speeches, somebody said, "We're going to miss seeing Tony White's 19-inch biceps."

My mother said, "They're talking about you,

boy!"

She was as proud as a peacock that day. I can still picture the bright smile on her face and the dress she was wearing. She only had one good dress. It was the same dress she wore to church every Sunday.

Chapter 4
Hercules

I played a lot of sports when I was a kid. I began boxing in the Police Athletic League when I was about eight years old. In the sixth grade, I wrestled on the Jefferson High School junior-varsity team in the 155-pound class. The coach at Jefferson wanted a solid junior-varsity team, so he let the coaches at James Madison Middle School know their students could come over and participate on the jayvee wrestling team.

When I was at Lee Junior High, I was on the junior varsity basketball team. I remember the coach as plain as the nose on my face. He said, "I want you boys to go home, get some good rest, come back tomorrow, and win this game. The team you're going to play is a chump team. You're much better, so you shouldn't have any trouble beating them."

The next night, when we were only 10 minutes into the game, my teammates were all huffing and puffing. We were also losing the game by more than 15 points. When the coach wanted to know why everybody was having such a hard time, I kept my mouth shut. I knew exactly what the problem was, but I wasn't a stooge, so I didn't tell him I knew the reason why. When I went home the night before, my teammates were all going out. They were in front of our house, making all kinds of noise. I remember my mother saying, "I wish them boys would go to bed." I laid in bed, listening to all the racket they were making. They spent most of the night out on the street corner: smoking grass,

drinking wine, and chasing girls. The next day, they all had hangovers. I was really pissed off because I knew that was what affected their game performance. I told myself, "I never, ever want to be on a team again."

From that day on, I stuck to individual sports. I didn't want to play team sports because I didn't want to rely on someone else to help me get somewhere in life. The two exceptions to that were when I played on the basketball team for the Police Athletic League, and when I was on the wrestling team at Jefferson High School. My success or failure was based on my own ability. If I lost, I had nobody to blame but myself.

When I decided to compete in individual sports, I competed in weightlifting, boxing, track and field, wrestling, and swimming. I wrestled in the amateur ranks from the sixth grade to the twelfth grade. I went unbeaten in high school, but it wasn't because I was such a skilled wrestler. It was mainly because I was so much stronger than

my opponents. If I got my hands on them, they were going to go down.

You can ask anybody in Roanoke who knew me in those days about the exhibitions I used to do in Hurt Park. My friends would back up two Volkswagens until their bumpers almost touched. I stood between them, knelt down, grabbed the bumpers, and lifted the rear end of both cars off the ground. People used to laugh because I carried my weights around with me. I would walk around for hours with 225 pounds on my shoulders. We've all seen kids carry their basketball to the court. I carried my weights. The teachers eventually told me I couldn't bring them to school.

I know it sounds like something I'm making up, but that's the way it was in my neighborhood. One of my friends used to walk around with boxing gloves hanging around his neck. The guys who played basketball? You never saw them without their ball. We didn't have video games. We didn't have cars. We had one thing: sports. I

believe that's why so many blacks became so good at sports. Our focus was on nothing else. That's why Muhammad Ali became such a good fighter. Mike Tyson spent his entire teenage life doing nothing but boxing, and on November 22, 1986, when he was just 20 years old, he beat Trevor Berbick for the WBC heavyweight championship and became the youngest heavyweight champion ever.

I began taking weightlifting seriously when I was incarcerated at the Diagnostic Center, but my interest in weightlifting really took off when I saw a set of weights in my friend Moochie's back yard. I picked them up and, for all practical purposes, never put them down. When I was working out at the Diagnostic Center, all I really did was work out my arms and shoulders. One day, while I was standing in Moochie's back yard with my shirt off, a guy named Alfonso Johnson walked up and said, "Why don't you work out with me at the YMCA?"

Alfonso, who worked out at the Roanoke YMCA, still works out there today. There was no way I could know it at the time, but Alfonso Johnson taking me under his wing, and getting me into the YMCA, was the event which would lead to my future career in professional wrestling. Of course, as I explained earlier, I didn't have money to pay for a membership in the Y. The manager knew that, so he told me if I would clean up the gym each night and keep the weight room neat, I could come in and train whenever I wanted.

At the time, I was 6-foot-3 and I weighed 155 pounds, but I wanted to pack on the weight because I wanted to wrestle in the unlimited weight class. I wanted to take on the big guys. It wasn't a thrill to beat the little guys. What kind of a thrill was it for me to beat a 150-pound guy? But, if I beat a 350-pound guy … hey-yyy! Like I said earlier, blacks in my day were always looking for a way to get that extra recognition.

Alfonso got me began in powerlifting, which

consists of three events: the squat, the bench press, and the deadlift. When I began to pump heavy iron, I put on a lot of weight. Whenever we worked out at the YMCA, we would end the workout by drinking a quart of milk. That also was Alfonso's idea. He said I needed the protein. I wrestled in the 155-pound weight class during my first year of high school, but every year after that, I competed in the unlimited class.

Weightlifting also gave me the strength I needed to protect myself in the neighborhood. One of the guys there was called Butterball. People used to tell me, "If you get in a fight, Tony, fight anybody but Butterball. He's too strong." That was when I came to the realization that strength was important. "Oh, so that's the key," I thought. "If I get strong, I don't have to worry about anybody picking on me." That gave me the extra incentive I needed to take weightlifting seriously.

It was natural for me to move into bodybuilding. When I was a kid, whenever I

earned any money, I would give it to my mother. Money was scarce, but at times, she would reward us by giving back 25 cents to spend. In those days, we could buy a soda pop, a MoonPie, and a PayDay candy bar with a quarter.

One afternoon, while I was walking by the movie theater, I saw a poster for the movie Hercules which featured an actor named Steve Reeves. It cost 25 cents to get into the theater. I sat there all day long and watched that movie five times. After the final showing of the day, the usher walked in and told me I had to leave. "Can I watch it just one more time?" I asked.

"No, but you can come back tomorrow."

I didn't have another quarter, so that was out of the question, but two important things happened: One, Steve Reeves became my idol, and, two, I decided I would one day be a famous bodybuilder.

Shortly after that, I met a guy named Steve Aegis

at the Holiday Health Spa in Salem, Virginia. He helped me train and showed me things about my weightlifting routine that I needed to change so I could adapt to bodybuilding. The guy who wrote my first bodybuilding routine was Jackie Cooper. I did his routine for 20 years. If anybody wants to know who trained Tony Atlas' body, it was a guy by the name of Jackie Cooper. I'll never forget him.

In my opinion, the best bodybuilders train in all three disciplines: weightlifting, powerlifting, and bodybuilding. Each of those sports has their own methods of training. I wanted to be a bodybuilder, but I didn't want big muscles with no power, so I took a little bit from each of the disciplines for my training routine.

The YMCA had a powerlifting team. When I began working out there, they were getting ready for a powerlifting meet in Hopewell, Virginia. At the time, the guys were bench pressing 225. I tried to do it, but I couldn't. After a couple of months, I

did it. The other guys thought it was an amazing accomplishment for somebody who had been training for as short a time as I had been. As I continued to train, my bench press climbed to 315, and then up to 350 pounds.

In 1973, they were starting a 220-pound weight class. A guy named Randy Booth, who was training Alfonso and me, asked me if I wanted to go with them to the contest in Hopewell. I said, "I don't have no money. I can't afford to pay for it."

Randy said, "Oh, don't worry about it. We'll take care of you. Several members of the team have offered to pay your way."

I couldn't believe him. Here I was, a poor, black kid, and a white guy was telling me he was going to pay my expenses. I turned and looked at him. "You've gotta be kiddin' me."

"No, I'm not, Tony. Just meet us at the Y at six tomorrow morning and we'll take care of

everything."

I went with them and won with a 350-pound bench press. Not only was it my first meet, it was the first time they had a competition in the 220-pound category. I also entered a weightlifting contest in which I put up a 400-pound clean and jerk, but I lost it before I could lock it out. After that, every time the team went to a contest, they invited me to go with them. I later set a Virginia state AAU bench press record of 480 pounds in the 220-pound class.

The guys on the team were as proud of me as I was of myself. In small towns like Roanoke, if somebody did something extraordinary, the whole team shared in the glory. From the way the team bragged about the contest, you would have thought they had done the bench press themselves. "Yeah, we beat them. We beat them. You can't beat people from the Noke. You can't beat people from the Noke." They bragged about it as if they personally won the contest. In a way, they did,

because they taught me everything I knew about powerlifting.

Most of the contests we attended featured three events: powerlifting, arm wrestling, and bodybuilding. Powerlifting began at ten o'clock in the morning. In the afternoon, they held arm wrestling contests, and bodybuilding competitions capped off the day. I usually entered all three events.

As a team, we didn't care if we won, lost, or drew. All that mattered was that we came home with at least one trophy. That was all that was important. It didn't matter if we brought home a trophy for first place, second place, or third place, either. We just wanted a trophy. One of the reasons I loved the bodybuilding contests was because they had five finishers. If we didn't win a first, second, or third place trophy, there was a chance we would win fourth or fifth. Bodybuilding gave us more opportunities to go home with a trophy.

The guys at the gym used to tease me, in a good-natured way, because I would go to a weekend contest and come home with three trophies. I did that many, many times. Randy Booth always got a kick out of watching me win several events over so much competition.

When I was 19 years old, I was the state champion in weightlifting, powerlifting, and arm wrestling. I also won the first bodybuilding contest I ever entered, Teenage Mr. Virginia, which was held in Norfolk.

I can never forget what those people did for me. They paid my expenses out of their own pockets. They gave me a membership to the YMCA. They taught me everything I knew about training to be a powerlifter, weightlifter, and bodybuilder.

Alfonso Johnson, Randy Booth, Jackie Cooper, and Steve Aegis …

I salute you.

Chapter 5
The Telephone Call

Sandy Scott gets the credit for getting me into professional wrestling, but it was a remarkable coincidence which brought us together. In 1974, while I was still on the Patrick Henry High School wrestling team, I would go to the YMCA on Saturday mornings to work out with a judo instructor. I took judo lessons for two years. The professional wrestlers, who wrestled at Starland Arena in Roanoke on Saturday nights, worked out at the YMCA on Saturday mornings.

When I walked into the YMCA one morning, Sandy was reading the newspaper. Strangely enough, the Roanoke Times newspaper that day featured a big story on my success in the high-school amateur wrestling meets. As I walked past

him, Sandy looked up at me. I'm not sure if he knew I was the guy he had been reading about in the article, but he must have noticed my physique.

I didn't watch wrestling because we didn't have a TV in my house, so I didn't know who Sandy Scott was, but Alfonso Johnson did. Alfonso was a big wrestling fan. He watched wrestling all the time. He knew all the wrestlers. Every time a wrestler came in to work out, Alfonso would say, "That's a wrestler." He would get all excited, like any wrestling fan would. I didn't pay much attention. I was there to work out, and I wasn't going to let anything get in the way of my training.

On that particular day, when Sandy walked into the weight room, Alfonso looked over and said, "That's a wrestler."

I looked at Sandy and said, "He don't look like a wrestler."

Alfonso says, "Yeah, he wrestles on TV."

I said, "He don't look like he did any wrestling in his whole life."

I was an amateur wrestler, so in my mind, I had an image of a guy with a 22-inch neck and thick, muscled shoulders. Not only that, but Sandy had just turned 40 years old.

I didn't know it at the time, but some of my "friends" at the gym were trying to stir up trouble. They were pointing at me and telling Sandy, "Hey, I'll bet that kid there can whoop your ass." When Sandy began asking questions, Randy Booth told him I was an amateur wrestler. Randy was saying, "He's training to break the state record of 600 pounds in the deadlift."

Sandy asked, "How much weight does he have on the bar?"

Randy said, "600."

As I bent down and lifted the bar, Randy said, "He also wrestles for the high school."

Sandy said, "He's can't be much of a wrestler. He looks like a bodybuilder. He's muscle-bound. He probably can't scratch the back of his head."

Alfonso took me over and introduced me to Sandy. When I told him I was wrestling in high school, Sandy said, "Well, when you finish school, give me a call."

I said, "I'd be glad to."

I really didn't know anything about pro wrestling. I had heard people talk about it, but I had never paid any attention to it. Other than what I had been told, I didn't know it even existed. My life consisted of nothing but school, the gym, and my after-school job at a hot-dog stand. I had to work because our family needed the extra income, so by the time I got home, it was nine or ten o'clock at night. I only had time to eat and sleep.

Blackjack Mulligan was the next wrestler I met. Once again, we were all in the gym at the YMCA, and as with Sandy Scott, I didn't know anything about him. Alfonso, of course, knew exactly who he was. When Blackjack walked into the gym, word got around that a professional wrestler was in the weight room.

Mulligan began his workout with the bench press. He did five sets of 10 reps with 275 pounds, but that wasn't too impressive because Mulligan weighed 300 pounds. A young, blonde-haired power-lifter, who couldn't have weighed more than 190 pounds, looked at Mulligan and said, "Why don't you put some weight on that bar? I thought you wrestlers were supposed to be strong!"

When Mulligan ignored him, the guy continued to make snide remarks. Mulligan slowly got off the bench, grabbed him by his weight-lifting belt, and pushed him against the wall. As I watched in amazement, Mulligan curled the guy up onto the

wall until his feet were dangling in the air. Mulligan looked him straight in the eyes and said, "Look, all I want to do is have a light workout. That's it. I've been fighting and drinking all night, so I want to do what I have to do before I go to the next town."

Then he dropped him. Of course, the guy was embarrassed because the other guys all saw what happened. He looked over at us for support, but we were all thinking, "You're on your own, bud. You started it … you can finish it."

The last thing he said to Blackjack was, "You're not as strong as Tony White!"

Once again, that comment encouraged my "friends" to egg me on, whispering things like, "You need to jump Mulligan and protect the reputation of the gym."

I thought they were nuts. I had no desire to get into a fight with Mulligan. I wasn't scared of him,

even though his hands were as big as a catcher's mitt, but I was excited because everybody told me he was a big name on TV. I had never met anybody who had been on TV, so I was more interested in meeting him than fighting him.

A short time later, Mulligan left to take a shower. Alfonso and I went into the locker room a few minutes later to change clothes. When we walked in, Mulligan walked out of the shower and stopped dead in his tracks. Other than the flip-flops on his feet, he was buck naked! That didn't stop Alfonso. He walked right up to Mulligan and held out his hand. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mister Mulligan," he said, and then he turned around and pointed towards me. "This is my friend, Tony White."

I was nervous, but I stepped up and said, "Excuse me for bothering you, sir. My name is Tony White. I would love to shake your hand."

Mulligan was very nice and took a few minutes to

talk to us. I told him I had met Sandy Scott and I was thinking about becoming a professional wrestler. He said, "Let me know if there is anything I can do to help you."

Mulligan later told me he had been relieved to know I had just wanted to meet him. He thought I had come into the locker room to fight him because of the incident in the gym. Mulligan was always willing to participate in a good fight, but he said he didn't feel like fighting anybody that day.

The second time I met Blackjack Mulligan was when George Scott had me watch the interviews in Raleigh, North Carolina. Mulligan opened the door to the television studio just as Ole Anderson came running through. He slapped Ole and knocked him on his rear end. Apparently, Ole had been giving him crap and Mulligan got tired of hearing it. Mulligan never gave me any trouble, though. He and I have always been good friends and he always treated me with respect.

In March 1975, Sandy Scott came to the YMCA with another wrestler. "This is Charlie Fulton," he said. "He's a professional wrestler. Let's see what you can do against him. See if you can take him down."

Everybody in the gym gathered around. I leg-dived Charlie, cradled him, and tied him up. He kept trying to stick his finger in my eye, but I had just returned from the regional tournament, so I was in excellent shape. I don't mean any offense to Charlie when I say this, but it felt like I was wrestling my kid sister. Charlie was a worker, not a wrestler, so he was easy to beat. Charlie had probably been out drinking beer all night long, too. I had another advantage because Charlie didn't know he was up against a guy who was an amateur wrestler, a boxer, a weightlifter, and who had taken judo lessons.

In the old days, it was considered an embarrassment for an outsider to beat a professional wrestler. When that happened, the

wrestlers had to protect the business, so they had two choices. They either convinced you to get on the mat with a shooter, at which point you were almost guaranteed to leave the mat with a broken leg or arm, or they brought you into the business.

I didn't actually know this until later, when I was actually in the business, but on the following week, they were going to send a shooter to the gym to break my leg. Sandy Scott had another idea. He liked me, so he said, "We're always looking for good, black wrestlers. Instead of hurting the kid, why don't we bring him to Charlotte and see what kind of an attitude he has? He might be a good candidate for the business."

I also was told they wanted to test my attitude. If I didn't pass their test, they would proceed with their original plans and break my leg. Fortunately, at that particular time in my life, I had a good attitude. My mother used a lot of sayings which I still use today. "Enjoy today, for tomorrow is promised to no one," "If you take one step, God

will take two," and "God helps those who help themselves." Those were the values my mother instilled in me. She knew she wouldn't be around forever. She wanted to be sure her words would carry me through life. The phrase she used most often, however, was "Your manners and behavior will take you where money never can." That phrase alone taught me to have good manners and to be respectful of others. Whenever my mother asked me a question, I had to answer "Yes, m'am," or "No, m'am."

When I walked into the YMCA on the following Saturday morning, Sandy was waiting in the lobby. "Hi, Tony. How've you been?" he asked.

"Fine."

"My brother, George, is the booker for Jim Crockett," he said.

"What's a booker?" I asked.

"He's the guy who hires and fires the

wrestlers. He could give you a job. Why don't you come to the wrestling office in Charlotte on Monday and we'll sit down and talk about it."

After he gave me directions to the wrestling office and a time to meet, we shook hands. I said, "Thanks, Mister Scott. I'll see you on Monday."

However, I didn't go. I didn't show up.

There was an old man behind the cage at the YMCA, whose job it was to hand us our towels and locker keys. When I walked into the YMCA the next day, he said, "You've got a phone call." I was shocked because I had never received a phone call. That might be hard to believe, but it's the truth. That was the first phone call I ever got in my whole life. I put the phone receiver to my ear and said, "Hello?"

It was Sandy Scott, who knew what time I arrived at the gym. Sandy began ranting, raving, and screaming. He was mad because I didn't show

up. "I've been trying to help you since the first day we met. I told everybody all about you and tried to help you. When you didn't show up, you made me look like an idiot, you piece of crap."

The only thing I could say was, "I'm sorry," over and over.

Sandy said, "I'm gonna give you one more chance. My brother will be in Greensboro next Thursday night. I want you to go down and talk to him."

I promised him I would, but as I hung up the phone, I was thinking, "How am I gonna get to Greensboro? I don't have a car."

I didn't have any money, either. As luck would have it, another guy who went to the YMCA was sitting in a chair next to the cage. I didn't know him, but he said, "I'll give you a ride to Greensboro. I'd like to meet those wrestlers."

I can't remember his name to save my life, but he

drove me the 90 miles to Greensboro. During our drive, I learned why he had been so eager to help. He said, "Now look. When we get there, tell them I'm your manager."

We got to the Coliseum early, so we walked around. When George finally showed up, he took me to the dressing room, and in front of all the wrestlers, he asked me, "What do you think of professional wrestling?"

I said, "I think professional wrestling is an exciting sport. It's a lot more involved and tougher than what people think it is. You have to be a good athlete. I think some of the guys sitting in this dressing room are some of the greatest athletes in the world."

When George and I walked back outside, he said, "The boys all seemed to like you."

A week later, Sandy told me their reason for wanting me in Greensboro had been to see what

the other guys thought about me. The wrestling business was like a close-knit family.

I passed the test with flying colors. I credit my mother for that. She always told me, "If you don't have nothin' good to say about nobody, don't say nothin' at all." So I didn't go into the dressing room and talk about wrestling being fake. If I had done that, they probably would have broken my leg right there and then. I didn't know that then, but I know it now. I always had a good attitude when I met people. That attitude was one of the things which pushed my career forward. Years later, of course, when my attitude changed, my career changed, too. When my attitude went into the toilet, my career followed along. However, I'm getting ahead of myself.

I had also told everybody that the guy who brought me was my manager. George told me it would be better if I didn't have a manager because they would take care of me. I didn't want to tell the guy and hurt his feelings, so I didn't say

anything.

Before I left Greensboro, George said, "I want you to come to Charlotte for training. Meet us at the Starland Arena (in Roanoke) on Saturday night and we'll leave from there. Bring your workout clothes."

I said, "Okay."

Two days later, with my workout clothes packed into my tiny Patrick Henry High School gym bag, Alfonso took me to the Starland Arena. Thinking I would be coming home the next day, the only other things I took with me were the clothes I was wearing and $1.50 in my pocket. . I didn't have any idea of what was in store for me.

After the matches that night, I rode to Charlotte with Klondike Bill. When we arrived in Charlotte, he dropped me off at the hotel where I would be staying. Klondike said, "This is where all the boys stay when they first get into town. You can get a

real good rate here."

"How much does a room cost?"

"It's only twenty bucks for the night."

That sounds cheap, and it was, even in 1975. I said, "Oh, I think I'll just wait for you guys here in the front."

"Why?"

"I've got no money."

"You don't?"

"Well, I have a dollar and fifty cents."

Klondike walked into the hotel, paid for my room, and gave me five dollars for food. I spent the entire following day [Sunday] walking around Charlotte. I made the five dollars last all day long by buying hot dogs at the White Castle.

On Monday morning, Sandy Scott picked me up and checked me into the YMCA. He reached into his pocket, pulled out some bills, and paid the YMCA for one month's rent. That covered the cost of my room and gym membership. We went into the gym and worked out with weights with the guys who were there: Ole Anderson, Gene Anderson, and Larry Sharpe. From there, we went to the wrestling office. When I got there, I told George Scott, "I don't have no money, so I can't stay."

Jimmy Crockett handed me $150 and said, "We're going to pay you one hundred fifty dollars every week while we train you to be a wrestler." George Scott told me I was the first and only person to be paid to become a wrestler. As far as I know, he was telling me the truth. Jimmy Crockett then said, "Since you don't have any money, and you don't have any way of supporting yourself, we will pay you. We'll take a little bit out of your check every time you wrestle."

They never did take back the money.

When I was training, I got up at seven o'clock in the morning and lifted weights at the YMCA for two hours. Johnny Valentine, who was the top wrestler in the Charlotte territory during that time, liked to lift weights, so most of the time, he met me there and we lifted together. At nine o'clock, I ran four miles.

The one thing I didn't do in the morning was eat breakfast. The one time I did, I threw up my entire breakfast while we were wrestling. I don't think I ever saw Gene Anderson laugh as hard and as long as he did that day. He said, "I told you not to eat breakfast. Don't eat breakfast again, kid. Don't do that again."

After leaving the gym, we went to the Park Center in Charlotte, where they held the wrestling shows on Monday nights. We had to run to the top row of the stadium, all the way across to the far end of the grandstand, and back down to the bottom. We had

to repeat that throughout the whole stadium. When we finished, we had to do 300 jumping jacks, 300 squats, 300 sit-ups, and 300 pushups. We then had to do sumo squats to a deck of cards. The number of squats they expect us to do was based on a card which somebody drew from a deck of 52. If the card was red, we had to do pushups. If it was black, we had to do squats. If a face card turned up, we had to do 30 reps. If we got the joker, it was 50. When we were through with the squats, and the muscles in our bodies felt like a rubber band, the shooters would all come in to stretch us. When they were finished making us scream, we wrestled each other. Their goal was to work and humiliate us until we begged for mercy or quit. The next day, they waited to see if we showed up for more. If we were tough enough to show up for another round, they put us through the same routine.

There was only one other guy in my class: a powerlifter. He was a big, country boy with a cocky attitude. He made the mistakes of walking

around Charlotte and telling people he was a wrestler. The best way to get heat with the old timers was to call yourself a wrestler before you actually earned the right to do so. When word got back to the office that he was bragging about being a wrestler, they decided to teach him a lesson.

Gene Anderson was a man's man. When the guy got into the ring with Gene for training the next morning, Gene said, "You know, kid. You should'a shown respect for the business. Instead, you were in town, shootin' your mouth off about bein' a wrestler, when in fact, you're nothin'. You need to learn some respect for this business, boy." Gene proceeded to stretch that poor boy until he was screaming at the top of his lungs, begging for mercy. He had huge tears running down his cheeks. Most people have no idea just how tough Gene Anderson was. That boy found out first-hand that day. When Gene finally let him go, the kid ran out of the ring, out of the building, and off the property … in his wrestling tights. Later that day, he called George Scott and

asked, "Can I please come back to get my car and my clothes?" He was pleading with George, and sobbing like a little child. Afterwards, Gene told me, "Let that be a lesson to you. The kid was shootin' off his mouth, tellin' people he was a wrestler. In this business, kid, that's something you have to earn. It ain't given to you."

Gene and Ole Anderson both spent a lot of time training me. They didn't make it easy on me, and I did my share of screaming, but neither one of them came anywhere near manhandling me like Gene did that kid. The two of them stretched me from one end of the ring to the other, but I loved them for it. They taught me a lot about being tough and having respect for the business.

I also got help from Mr. Fuji, Ken Patera, Karl Gotch, and Killer Karl Kox. I think Kox came there just to beat us up. The more we squirmed, the tougher he got. After I got into the business, I realized why they did that. We had to be tough to be able to handle life on the road. They wanted

people who could wrestle after driving 400 miles. They wanted people who could live on a diet of bologna, cheese, and a six-pack of Budweiser, and still be able to wrestle. The wrestling business was not for weaklings. We had to be tough to make it. If we had to make a 200-mile trip, we considered ourselves to be fortunate. "Two hundred miles? Thank God! We've got a short trip today!"

It wasn't uncommon for us to leave for a show at three o'clock in the afternoon, get home at two or three o'clock in the morning, and then get up at seven o'clock for a workout. We laid the groundwork for the cats in the wrestling business today.

It was a tough way to make a living, but I loved it. I loved it! I was a jock. I always liked being pushed to my limit. To me, that was enjoyable. To cap it off, I was being paid $150 a week. When I lived in Roanoke, I had to work for three weeks to make that much money. They could have paid me

$150 one time and I would have been happy.

I remember telling my mother, "Hey, I got a job!" That's how I saw it. I had a job. She thought it was great. She had always told me that I should be a basketball player, though. In 1975, if you were 6-foot-3, you were considered to be tall. Today, you would only be considered average.

The best thing that came out of the business in those early days was that I was able to give my mother $50 every week. On Sunday, I would ride the bus to Roanoke to give her the 50 bucks and spend time with my family.

At the very beginning of my career, the three guys who were primarily responsible for my training were Ole Anderson, Gene Anderson, and Larry Sharpe. Gene was in charge of the program, so he was there every day. He would work with me for an hour, and then he would leave to play handball with George Scott. Ole came down two or three

times a week to work out with me. The guy who worked with me the most was Larry Sharpe, who is now the owner of The Monster Factory, a wrestling school in New Jersey. Larry worked on the undercard, so the Crocketts expected him to be there with me every day.

In the afternoon, I would ride to the shows with Johnny Heidemann, where I would watch all of the matches. When the matches were over, Johnny would take me home.

The next morning at seven o'clock, the process repeated itself. That routine was my life from March to June 1975.

Chapter 6
Learning the Ropes

The most interesting thing about my training was that I never knew anything about how the business

really worked until after I had my first match. The old-timers didn't smarten you up until they felt you had paid your dues and that you could be trusted, and often, they didn't consider your dues to have been paid until you had your first match.

I can give one really good example of how the guys went to great lengths to kayfabe me. One day, while I was training, Bob Bruggers came to the Park Center to watch. Bob was a good athlete. From 1966 to 1971, before he got into wrestling, Bob had played pro football with the Miami Dolphins and San Diego Chargers. Gene said, "Bob, you're supposed to be such a great amateur. Why don't you get into the ring with Ole and me and we'll show Tony how pros handle you amateur pukes."

Bob hesitated for a minute or two, but with his reputation on the line, he eventually got into the ring. For the next few minutes, he threw Ole and Gene from one side of the ring to the other. When Bob left the ring, Gene said, "Tony, get your ass

back in here."

As soon as I was in the ring, Gene said, "All right. If that little bastard can throw us around, show us what you can do."

At the time, I could do a 550-pound bench press. I was stronger than any wrestler I had met up to that time. And yet, when I tried to throw Gene or Ole, I couldn't budge them. Their feet remained planted to the canvas as if they were glued there. They told me over and over that I had to learn the principles of leverage. When I left that day, I had no idea that Bruggers had been working with them, and they were helping him "throw" them by pushing themselves up and off the mat.

When I got home that night, the first thing I did was pay a visit to my high school wrestling coach, hoping he would teach me about "leverage." As Bugs Bunny used to say, "What a maroon!"

George Scott decided my first match would take

place in Anderson, South Carolina, on July 10, 1975. Several of the guys told George that it was too early for me to debut. "He needs at least six months," they said, but George overruled them. "No, he needs to start makin' some money. He's ready. We can get him through."

In most poor neighborhoods, kids have nicknames. I was the strong, muscular kid in the neighborhood, so everybody would always name me after strongmen. Most of the time, my friends called me Herc, which was short for Hercules. When the Ben Hur movie came out, everybody called me Ben Hur. There was one kid in high school who always had his nose buried in a book, so we called him "Bookworm." When he heard the guys calling me Hercules, he began laughing. "What's so funny?" I asked.

"Why do they call you Hercules?" he asked "He's Greek."

"What the hell does that have to do with

anything?"

"You aren't Greek."

"Well, then I'll call myself Samson."

He began laughing again. "Why are you laughing now?"

"He's Jewish."

"Well, what can I call myself?"

He said, "Atlas."

"Why should I call myself Atlas?" I asked.

"Do you know where the Atlas Mountains are?"

"No, where are they?"

"In Morocco ... North Africa. Atlas was from Africa. He wasn't from the southern region of Africa. He was from northern Africa. But that's

close enough, ain't it?"

I got mad at him, but when I was lying in bed that night, I began to think about what he had said. I had no idea where the Atlas Mountains were until I met that kid. In fact, I didn't even know there was an Atlas Mountain. I thought, That guy has a point. There's a lot of black people in Morocco. There's no black people in Israel. There's no black people in Greece. I'd look stupid trying to tell people I'm Jewish or Greek when I'm not.

That's the story which led to Tony White becoming Tony Atlas, and George Scott picked up on it. Before the match, he said, "We have to find a name to fit you, kid." When I told George the story about how the kids called me "Atlas" in high school, he said, "Okay, we'll call you Tony Atlas White." George would eventually drop the "White" from the end of my name and bill me as Tony Atlas.

I'll never forget that first match. Bob Bruggers and I wrestled as a tag team against Art Nelson and the Blue Scorpion. You have to remember: I wasn't smart to the business and I didn't know the match was supposed to be a work. For that matter, I didn't even know the meaning of the word "work" as it pertained to the wrestling business. When I was training, I was wrestling. In fact, most of the time, I was shooting for my life.

The match with Nelson and Scorpion wasn't any different from my training. When Bob Bruggers got into the ring, he threw Nelson and Scorpion all over the place. Every time he touched them, they flew across the ring and took big bumps. When I got into the ring and tried to do the same things, I couldn't budge them. It was as if Nelson's and Scorpion's boots were stuck to the mat.

I didn't know this until later, but in the dressing room, Bruggers had been given the finish for the match. He was told his opponents would double-team him and prevent him from making the tag with

me. After five minutes, he would make the hot tag and I would come into the ring to make the big save. They didn't share any of that information with me, though. All I was told was that I could probably win the match if I put Art Nelson out with the sleeper.

There were two problems with that scenario, and evidently, nobody thought about it before the match began.

First of all, as I said, nobody told me the match was supposed to be a work. Of course, even if they had, I wouldn't have had a clue as to what they were talking about. For all I knew, I was supposed to put Nelson in the sleeper and hold it until he went to sleep. Second, nobody considered the fact that I was stronger than most, if not all, of the wrestlers in the territory. I was 250 pounds of solid muscle. If I got a hold on somebody, there weren't many guys who would be able to get out of it until I was ready to release them.

And that's exactly what happened. I clamped the sleeper on Art Nelson, but when I did, he dove for the ropes. The referee said, "You've gotta let him go now. He's through the ropes."

Out of everybody in the promotion, I think Art was the first guy to come to the realization that, since I wasn't smart to what was going on, I might be dangerous and cause him big trouble. I came to that conclusion later, after I had been smartened up. After the referee made me break the hold, Nelson scooted through the ropes and refused to get back into the ring. Evidently, Scorpion hadn't reached that conclusion. When the referee whispered to him, "Art won't come back in. You'll have to take the fall," Scorpion went for it.

Unfortunately for him, I did exactly what Art Nelson was afraid I would have done to him. I clamped the sleeper on Scorpion and refused to let go until he was unconscious. That wasn't a work. It was a shoot. Scorpion was dead to the

world.

When I walked into the dressing room, George Scott was talking to Art Nelson, but I didn't hear a word being said. My complete attention was fixed on the other end of the dressing room, where Ric Flair stood shaking his pecker at somebody. That was the first time I had the opportunity to see Flair do that. To say I was shocked would be an understatement, but it wouldn't be the last time I would witness him doing that, and just about everybody else who has been around him will attest to that fact. Of course, I saw him do that hundreds of times, and it eventually lost its shock value.

I had been told that you should always thank your opponent for the match. However, when I walked in, Art walked away as he said to George, "Look, you smarten that damn nigger up now, or I'm gonna kill him the next time he gets in the ring with me."

George pulled me to the side and said,

"Tomorrow morning, we will teach you how to work. Be at the Park Center in the morning."

Sandy Scott was a very good friend. When I saw him later that night, I told him, "I'm going to learn to work tomorrow."

He said, "Why are you going to work? Don't you like wrestling? What are you going to do? Get a job at a hamburger joint?"

I went around telling everybody. "Hey, they're gonna teach me how to work tomorrow!"

The funny thing about that was, I didn't even know what "how to work" meant. When I told everybody, they began to ask questions. "What are you talking about, Tony. Are you gonna be a construction worker?" Everybody was still kayfabing me. That's a good example of how long it took to get accepted into the wrestling business. It was so well-protected.

Johnny Heidemann was given the job of teaching

me how to work. The next morning at the Park Center, while he was showing me how to do a specific series of moves, the janitor walked in. Johnny immediately planted the toe of his boot into my stomach. I had never experienced pain like that in my life. I became so nauseous that I almost vomited all over myself. "Sorry, kid. I had to do that." That's how protective they were. Johnny had to give me a real shot because the janitor walked in! After I caught my breath, all I could do was think about how I wanted to beat up the janitor.

One of the first things Johnny taught me was the proper way to put on a headlock. "When you put a headlock on, don't do it that way. Do it this way."

I was so disappointed. I didn't know any better. All along, I had been telling myself, "I'm gonna be champion in a year." When I was told the wrestling business was all controlled, I thought, "Oh, no." You have to remember that you're reading the autobiography of a guy who didn't

finish high school until he was 20 years old. I wasn't the brightest person in the world at that time (or today). I didn't smarten up to life until I was in my forties. Then it all came clear. Forty has a way of doing that to a person.

A few nights later, I wrestled in Raleigh. After the matches, I went back to my room at the Raleigh Hilton. A few minutes after I got there, George Scott knocked on my door. He said, "The boys think you're anti-social. You should come down to the lounge and mingle." It might be hard to believe, especially for somebody who grew up in the environment I did, but at the age of 22, I had never drank alcohol or smoked cigarettes. I went downstairs and the guys bought me a beer. That's how bad habits get started. I drank a lot of beer in the years which followed.

I learned a lot of things during my first few months in the business, and many of them had nothing to do with wrestling. For instance, Henry Marcus was the promoter in Charleston, South

Carolina. For at least six months after breaking into the business, I didn't own a car, so I rode the bus on my first trip there, and took a cab from the bus station to the County Hall auditorium.

During that time, a lot of the arena rats were getting into the matches without having to pay. Henry was getting tired of it, so he stood at the front door of County Hall where the tickets were sold and told everybody who walked up, "Anybody that comes in here has to buy a ticket."

I had my wrestling bag in my hand, so I asked him, "Do I have to buy a ticket?"

"If you want to get in this building, you've gotta buy a ticket," and he walked away.

So, I bought a ticket.

If you ever have an opportunity to talk to Ole Anderson, ask him about that. He'll verify it. I bought a ticket!

When I walked into the dressing room, I asked the boys, "Did ya'll have to buy a ticket, too?"

They said, "No, we work here, Tony. We don't have to buy a ticket."

I said, "Well, I had to buy a ticket to get in."

Everybody in the room began laughing. They thought that was the funniest thing they had ever heard in their life. Knowing what I know now, it probably was.

When Henry Marcus came back to the dressing room, they asked him, "Henry, did you make Tony buy a ticket?"

"Yeah, I didn't know who he was."

Sandy Scott said, "Henry, now that you know who he is, are you gonna give him his money back?"

"No, no. He just bought a valuable lesson."

Henry never did refund my money.

After that incident, Henry and I became good friends. He was really a character. He wore suspenders and hiked his pants up high, with the waistband around his chest and almost up to his arm pits. I really became attached to him. He became somewhat of a father-figure to me. At various times in my life, Ole Anderson, George Scott, and Paul Boesch were also in that role. I grew up without a father on whom I could count, so I was always looking for that father figure, and the four of them filled the bill. Most of the boys were older than me, too. My mother used to ask, "How come you hang out with all those old people? Every time I see you, you're with those old men. How come you don't hang around with boys your own age?"

Henry would take me to restaurants, and while we drove around Savannah, he would tell me all about the history of the town. He knew a lot about his community. The thing I remember the most was

the story about William T. Sherman, the famous Union general. Henry showed me the mansion where Sherman set up his headquarters in 1864.

Another time, I was supposed to go to Farmville, Virginia, but I ended up in Fayetteville, North Carolina. The boys teased me and said the office shouldn't book me when they run two towns which start with the same letter on the same night, because I wouldn't know which one to go to. Paul Jones stood up for me and said, "Well, at least he was smart enough to go to the better town!"

Bill Howard was a big help to me when I was learning to do TV interviews. One night, I rode to Spartanburg, South Carolina, with Klondike Bill and Johnny Weaver. On the way home, we stopped to get some hot dogs at a convenience store that was a regular stop for the boys. While I was waiting to pay for the items I wanted to buy, Johnny said, "Turn around, Tony. You're on TV."

I turned around and saw myself standing next to

the color commentator. We were usually on the road when the wrestling show aired, so I had never seen or heard myself on television. One of the people watching the TV and listening to the show was a fat, white man. He was a wrestling fan. He was laughing, giggling, and carrying on. He turned around, looked at me, and said, "Boy, you're really tellin' 'em. I don't know what the hell you're sayin', but you're tellin' 'em somethin'."

It was one of my first promos, and it sounded something like this: "Bleh bleh bleh, dep dep voo, bleh, bleh, bleh, ah bahh bah bah." It dawned on me at that moment that I needed to slow down and pronounce my words so people could understand me.

When I got back into the car, I asked Bill, "Bill, how can I talk so people can understand me?"

He said, "Go to a pawn shop and buy a tape recorder. Practice doing interviews and tape them. Use me as the subject. Tell people you're

gonna wrestle Bill Howard at a certain time and place. Do them just like you're gonna do an interview for TV. Do a bunch of them, but don't listen to them right after you do them. Wait for a week or two. Fill up the whole tape if you want, but wait a week until you listen to them. When you sound good to yourself, that's when you'll sound good to the people."

That's what I did. Every night, while I sat in the hotel room, I taped interviews. At first, when I played them back, I laughed out loud. I thought to myself, "Who in the hell is this guy?" Eventually, I began thinking, "Hey, that's starting to sound pretty good!"

I'm not sure if it really mattered that much, though. One of the reasons I drew money was because I was black. The people might not have been able to understand me, but they saw a black guy, which was a draw in itself.

Wahoo McDaniel also was kind to me when I

was getting started in the business. Wahoo was a rough, tough man. His idea of fun was to go out and find somebody to fight, and I don't think he ever lost one. However, there was another side to Wahoo that most people never saw: a fun-loving man with a heart of gold. Wahoo would let me ride with him. I could never ride with Ric Flair because he was a top guy, and Flair never rode with undercard guys. Wahoo was different. He was a top guy, too, but he treated everybody with respect, whether you were the bottom guy on the card or a main eventer.

George Scott bought me my first pair of trunks and boots. The boots were the old-fashioned kind with very thin soles and no heel. The toes pointed up into the air, like a leprechaun shoe. After several days of taking bumps and having the back of my heel hit the mat, I developed heel spurs. When I wasn't wrestling, I wore Converse All-Star sneakers. The boy all made fun of the luggage in which I used to carry my sneakers and ring gear from town to town. That luggage was a

brown, paper grocery bag.

One day, when Wahoo picked me up at the Charlotte YMCA, he said, "Don't bring that old bag into my car." He made me take out my gear and leave the bag on the ground. When I got into the back seat of the car, holding my boots and trunks in my arms, he said, "Don't sit in my car holding your boots! Put them in that bag over there."

When I looked at the seat beside me, I saw a yellow bag with a dolphin embroidered on the side. It was the bag the Miami Dolphins gave Wahoo when he played for them in 1966. "That bag" had special meaning to Wahoo, and yet he gave it to me. When I opened the bag to put my old boots and ring gear inside, I saw a beautiful, brand-new pair of boots and trunks. I had been wearing long tights, but Wahoo said, "With your body, you should come out of those clown trunks that George Scott put you in." I don't think George Scott was being malicious when he gave me those

old tights, but he was trying to promote me in the old Negro stereotype, like Thunderbolt Patterson or Rufus R. Jones. It was Wahoo who got me out of the tights and into wrestling trunks.

Johnny Weaver and Johnny Heidemann helped me a lot, too. Most of my early education in the business came from Johnny Weaver. He told me, "One day, Tony, all the guys in the business are going to look like you." My first year-and-a-half in the business was all Johnny Weaver. I don't know how he knew that, but he knew the direction the business was headed long before anybody else.

Johnny Heidemann told me something else that came true. "Son, get ready, because you're about to embark on a paid trip around the world." The wrestling business allowed me to go on a trip that I never would have been able to afford, and for that, I'll always be grateful.

I think what made me stand out from the other bodybuilder-types was the fact that I was a 250-

pound, muscular wrestler who also was a flyer. I flew around the ring doing dropkicks, head scissors, and leapfrogs. Most people back then had the impression that if someone had muscles, they were muscle-bound. They thought we couldn't scratch the back of our heads because our muscles got in the way. "You can't scratch the back of your head. You can't do this. You can't do that."

There was a strange mix of guys in the business. Johnny Weaver, Johnny Heidemann, and Bill Howard were always willing to give advice to help advance my career. Rene Goulet helped me with my facial expressions, and when I had trouble making my punches look real, he put a bucket on a dresser and told me to punch it without knocking it off.

Many of the veterans, however, weren't as willing to help the young studs. They kept the secrets of the business to themselves because they were afraid they would be helping somebody take

their jobs. Years later in my career, when I was the experienced veteran, I was giving advice to a young rookie. Blackjack Mulligan said, "Tony, don't do that. If they learn the tricks of the trade, you'll be out of a job."

Gene Anderson was always willing to show me the correct way to do things. When we were wrestling one night, I hit him in the chest. He stopped in the middle of the ring and just stared at me. When he spoke, his exact words were, "Is that as hard as you can hit, you fucking cunt?"

In the dressing room later that night, George Scott told me, "Hit him so hard they can hear it in the cheap seats."

That's why I laugh when people say wrestling's fake … because it isn't! Yes, the outcome of the matches was predetermined, but the guys who lost would have probably lost, anyway. Most of the time, whenever I lost to somebody, I felt like they could have beaten me in a shoot. When I lost a

match to Ole, I really believed he could have beaten me if that was what he had wanted to do. I knew Gene could. There was no guessing about that! Gene would have whipped my ass. Gene routinely rubbed my nose into the mat and said, "Show me what ya got, kid."

What I didn't realize about working at the time was that the real "work" took place in the dressing room after the match. During my first week in the ring, I thought I was a natural as a worker because everybody would say, "Great match, kid!" I also didn't recognize the fact that guys like Gene and Ole were leading me around the ring. They would put my hands on their wrists or legs, and move around until I had a devastating hold on them. They were screaming for mercy and begging for me to let them go. Meanwhile, I didn't even know how I got them in that hold. For that matter, I didn't even know what the hold was or what it was supposed to do.

I was lucky. Not only was I the first and only

wrestler who was paid to train, I also was one of the first wrestlers to wrestle in their hometown. Wrestlers weren't given an opportunity to wrestle in their hometown because there would probably be somebody in that town who would say, "Hey, I used to beat him up in school." The promoters were very protective of the business. They were afraid to take a wrestler to his hometown because they knew the people there knew him. It would be almost impossible to fool the people who really knew him. They didn't want the people in the audience to tell everybody that so-and-so was a wimp.

For me, however, it was completely the opposite. I remember the people in the office having a discussion on whether or not to book me in Roanoke. Wahoo McDaniel was in the office while that discussion was going on. He reminded them that I had beaten up just about everybody in my neighborhood. He told them, "If anything, Tony will have the opposite problem. If you beat him, the people won't believe it." They talked about the

possibility that if a wrestler did beat me, the people would think there was no way my match could have been real because they believed nobody could beat me.

When I got my first payoff, I went downtown and bought a suit in every color you could imagine. Bright colors: light blue, orange, black, grey, pink, and canary yellow. I topped off my wardrobe with a big-brimmed hat. I looked like Youngblood Priest, the cocaine dealer in the movie Superfly.

After I finished my spending spree, I called Rufus and asked him if he would mind giving me a ride to the wrestling office. My first payday was $1,500, but after my shopping spree, I was broke. I spent $1,000 on the suits and sent $500 to my mother. If I was going to be able to pay my road expenses and food bill, I needed to get an advance on my money. When Rufus saw me, the first words out of his mouth were, "Tony! You look pretty sharp."

Paul Jones was walking out the front door of the wrestling office as I was getting out of the car. He took one look at me and almost choked on his tobacco. He turned around and ran back inside to tell George Scott, "George! C'mere! You gotta see what you created!"

The entire office came outside to see me.

I never had nice clothes when I was kid, so when I had $1,500 in my pocket, I was like a kid in a candy store. And yet, even though I had no idea of the value of money, I gave away a lot of the money I earned. I sent money to my mother every week. The respect I showed my mother was one of the reasons why the Crocketts liked me so much. Six months after my wrestling debut, I went home for a few days at Christmas. I got on a bus bound for Roanoke with $3,000 in my pocket. For Christmas, I gave my mother $1,000 and a $100 bill to 20 of my closest friends. I did that a lot because the neighborhood was like family. When Charlie Fulton told me his car had broken down, I

didn't even think about it. I just took out my wallet and gave him $300.

I didn't grow up in the ghetto. There was only one store, and just about everybody was poor, but that was simply rural America. The people I knew, I really knew. People lived in the neighborhoods all of their lives, and didn't move from one neighborhood to another. There would be gang wars when somebody stepped on another gang's turf. I was from southwest Roanoke. If somebody saw me walking in the northwest, I would have to fight my way out. I wasn't allowed in white neighborhoods, either. The only time I left the neighborhood was to go to school, work, or the YMCA.

Wahoo McDaniel must have been a psychic because he predicted the future when he told George, "Tony is a good kid, but you're gonna mess him up. You're giving him too much, too soon." Wahoo wasn't talking behind my back because I was standing right there in George's

office with the two of them. It would be more than 10 years before I would really understand what Wahoo meant by "Too much, too soon," but he seemed to know exactly what the future held for me.

While I was still in my first week in the business, I learned the most valuable lesson of my career. I was riding in a car with a bunch of the guys. One of them asked, "How much money did you make last week, Tony?"

"I made fifteen hundred."

"Is that all? Is that all the money you made? Oh, they're screwin' you! They paid Rufus [R. Jones] more than they paid you."

That went on for hours. I finally spoke up. "Gentlemen, I think I should be gettin' more money."

I was just going along with the guys. I didn't want to disagree with them. It was their car and I

didn't really know them all that well, so I just agreed with what they were saying. The next day, George Scott called and told me to come to the wrestling office. "Tony, are you not satisfied with the money you're making here?"

"Oh, no. I'm very happy." And I was.

George said, "I got four phone calls last night from people who said you were bitchin' about your pay. How much money were you making before you started working here."

"Sixty bucks a week."

"You were making sixty bucks a week, and now you're gonna bitch about making fifteen hundred?"

I tried to explain. "I only agreed with them because I didn't want them to kick me out of the car."

George said, "No one in that car made more than a thousand dollars last week, and you told them

what you made. As a lesson, I'm going to send you on the road."

So George sent me to Hell.

Chapter 7
A Mattress, a Boxspring, and the Floor

"Hell" was actually a wrestling territory in Kansas City, Missouri. I worked there for Bob Geigel and Pat O'Connor. The only people who were making money in the Kansas City territory were the promoters: Bob Geigel, Pat O'Connor, and Harley Race.

It was a tough territory. For some reason, I always felt like I was in danger. We stayed at the Razorback Hotel, which was located in a really sleazy part of town. It wasn't like Detroit or St. Louis, which are two of the most dangerous cities

in the United States. It was a small, backwoods town more along the lines of a town where the Texas Chainsaw Massacre took place. Kansas City was a good city in which to wrestle, but away from the arena, it was a dreary-looking place. On the street outside the hotel, there were a number of buildings with small rooms which were not much bigger than a typical bathroom. No more than two people could fit into those rooms. Strippers worked inside those rooms. The guy who ran the elevator at the hotel also ran the girls. When you walked into a room, you would hand the girl money and she would begin stripping.

I only wrestled twice: once in Kansas City, Kansas, and once in St. Joseph, Missouri. The match in Kansas City on October 16, 1975, was a tag team match with me and a black wrestler named Ormond Mulumba against Big Bad John and the General. I don't remember the match, but I'll never forget Big Bad John. He drove 120 mph while drinking a fifth of liquor. Mulumba had a muscular body and huge, thick legs. He had the

total package and would have done well as a bodybuilder.

That's where I met Sandy Parker, one of the lady wrestlers. When the guys introduced us, she walked up to me, grabbed me by my big afro, pulled me to her, and gave me the wettest kiss I ever had in my life. That was the first and last time I ever met her.

Tank Patton also was wrestling in Kansas City at the time. Every time he saw me, he said, "Hey, nigger." He was an uptight, racist guy, but strangely enough, I liked him. He didn't treat me badly. He just had an old-school, white, southern attitude about blacks. That was just the way the guys were back then. We accepted people for what they were. That's what made characters like Tank Patton so real to the wrestling fans. They didn't fake their characters. They acted the same way outside the arena as they did on the inside. Ric Flair was the best example of that.

When I finished my bookings, Bob Geigel gave me a bus ticket and sent me to Dallas to work for Fritz von Erich. My time there was both short and uneventful, although I remember a couple of funny stories about Bronko Lubich, a former wrestler and one of the referees in the Dallas territory.

One night, one of the wrestling bears was on the card. Bronko was scared to get near it, so whenever he had to walk past the bear, he would make a wide detour around it. He did that several times. Each time Bronko walked by the bear, the bear sat still and acted as if Bronko wasn't even there. Bronko finally felt comfortable enough that he decided to walk right past the bear. When he got within a few feet, the bear lunged at him. Bronko jumped so high that his head almost touched the ceiling.

Another time, Bronko and I were driving home from Lubbock. I noticed we were moving along at a pretty fast clip, so I glanced at the speedometer. We were going 80 mph. Looking up

at his face, I noticed he was sweating, and there was a panicked look in his eyes. I thought he must be having a stroke or something. When I looked back at the odometer, it registered 100 mph. I was getting nervous, but I had respect for him, so I didn't question him. When the odometer hit 110 mph, I finally had to ask, "Why are you going so fast?"

"I gotta beat it."

I thought perhaps he had an emergency at home. After a few moments of silence, he said, "I think I'm gonna beat it." When I noticed him looking into the rear view mirror, I turned around … and saw a twister less than 100 yards behind us.

After just a few days in Dallas, I left for Amarillo, where I would work for Dory and Terry Funk. On my last night in the Dallas territory, one of the wrestlers, Ray Candy, introduced me to a girl who lived in Amarillo. She told me I could

ride with her so I wouldn't have to make the trip on a bus. Ray told me she would take me to her house and make me a good, home-cooked meal. I couldn't turn down the offer.

She lived with her three children in an old slave shack in the middle of a cotton field. When we got off the interstate, we drove up and down quite a few dirt roads. There weren't any buildings around. It was like the old west. Of course, her living conditions were better than what I had when I was growing up, so that didn't faze me in the least. The only thing that really bothered me was the snakes. When we got out of the car, I saw several slithering around, so I was pretty nervous. They didn't bother her, though. She would just throw a stone at them.

While she was in the kitchen cooking ham hocks and black-eyed peas, one of the kids came running into the house, screaming, "He's here! He's here!"

A few seconds later, a guy stormed into the

house, waving a .45 in his hand. He put the barrel of the gun between my eyes, backed me into the bedroom, and closed the door. They engaged in a screaming match which ended when he slapped her in the face and left the house. When I heard the slap, I kicked open the door because I won't put up with a man hitting a woman. I didn't care about the fact that he had a gun. I had my mind made up that I was going to teach him a lesson, but before I could get to him, he was in his pickup truck and on the road before I could get to him.

She later told me he was her boyfriend, and that she had broken up with him earlier that day. He was angry because she would leave on weekends and go to Dallas, where she would have sex with the wrestlers.

Later that night, when her mother showed up, we left the house to go find him. When we did, the two of them had a short shouting match which broke down into accusations of, "You do this," and "You do that." The next thing I knew, they were in

each others' arms, hugging and kissing. The girl came back to the car and we went back to her house. In the morning, she took me to the bus station.

The next night, I worked in Amarillo, which is where I first met the legendary Sputnik Monroe. Sputnik Monroe was a white black man. He was blacker than I was. If there was anything I wanted from the black culture, people would say, "Ask Sputnik."

"I wanna get laid. Where can I meet some black girls?"

"Ask Sputnik. He knows 'em all."

"Where can I get some good barbeque?"

"Talk to Sputnik."

"Can you get chitlins around here?"

"I don't know. Go ask Sputnik."

One day, when somebody told me to talk to Sputnik, I asked them, "Why not Ray Candy?"

They said, "Ah, he doesn't know anything about black people."

And Ray was black! You could get anything you wanted pertaining to the black culture by talking to Sputnik. I wanted barbeque one day, so Sputnik took me to a black neighborhood which was way out in the boonies, and introduced me to a blind guy who cooked barbeque. Boy, the black people in Texas loved that guy to death. He was the king of the blacks. I wrestled Sputnik one night in Abilene. The audience was about seventy percent black, so I thought I would be considered the biggest babyface ever in the history of Abilene wrestling. Wrong! Everybody, white and black, cheered for Sputnik … and they booed me! That really shocked me. Sputnik Monroe and Dusty Rhodes were the only two white guys I knew who the black people loved more than people of their own color.

Terry Funk told me a story about Sputnik and several other wrestlers trying to start a union. Nobody showed up at the meeting with the promoter—except Sputnik—and he lost his job. Years later, in 1984, Jesse Ventura tried to do the same thing. He made his play during a big pay-per-view. "We're never gonna get the opportunity to do this again, guys," Jesse told his fellow wrestlers. "This show is live. We have 'em right where we want 'em." Unfortunately, Hulk Hogan stooged him off, and the next thing you know, Vincent Kennedy McMahon, Jr. [hereafter referred to as Vince, Jr.] showed up. In my opinion, that was the only reason why Vince brought Jesse back to work for the WWF. The only reason ... was to keep that organization from getting off the ground.

That was one of the biggest problems with the business. The wrestlers never stuck together. A lot of people say wrestling is a sport, but it isn't. It's a game. If I was playing football, the game wouldn't start until I was on the field. If I played basketball, the game starts when the team

gets on the court. In wrestling, the game isn't really in the ring. It's played constantly. It's like "king of the mountain." You're on your own. There are only a few tops spots and everyone is always jockeying for those positions. Mad Dog Vachon once told me, "Wrestling is a dog-eat-dog sport … and you must get your bite."

From Amarillo, I went to San Antonio for Joe Blanchard. On my final night in the territory, Terry Funk and I were changing in the same dressing room. My pants were hanging from a peg on the wall, so Joe Blanchard put what he thought was my money envelope into my pants pocket. As soon as my match was over, I had to take a bus to the airport and catch a flight to Charlotte, so I didn't take time to count the money until I got on the bus. When I did count it, I counted out $500. I thought, "Man, they pay good in San Antonio."

I didn't average much more than $100 a week during the time I spent in Kansas City, Amarillo,

and San Antonio. I was so broke I had to borrow money just to get back to Charlotte. I realized the mistake a few minutes later when I saw Terry Funk's name on the pay envelope. I can imagine the hell Terry must have given Joe Blanchard when he counted his money and discovered his payoff was $25. Of course, they discovered the mistake right away because my name was written on the envelope Terry had.

I have always been an honest guy, but that was the one time I slipped. I thought I might be able to profit from Joe Blanchard's mistake. Even though Terry's name was on the envelope, I figured they would just give him more money and forget about the money they accidentally gave me. That shows how little I knew about wrestling promoters at that time in my life.

When I went to the Charlotte office the next day, George Scott called me into his office and said, "You got a pretty good payday last night, huh?"

"Yes, I have it with me," I said.

"I don't have a thief on my hands here, do I?"

"No, I was going to give it back, but I feel bad because I got called on it before I could return it."

George made me call Terry to apologize. It wasn't until I talked to Terry that I realized what a bad error in judgment I had made by not owning up to the fact that I had the wrong envelope. Terry thought I had gone into his pants pocket and stolen his money. If I had called and told somebody I had the wrong envelope, everybody would have had a good laugh and it would have been over. Instead, by keeping the envelope and not reporting it, I made myself look like a common thief.

When I explained the facts to Terry and told him I got the money by accident, he asked, "Well, were you going to return it?"

"I probably would have," I explained, "but it just felt so good to have that money in my pocket."

I saw Terry a few years ago and reminded him of that story. He laughed and said he knew it had been a misunderstanding.

I could never be a criminal. Not only do I not have the criminal mindset, but every time I tried to do something dishonest in my life, I got caught.

That whole experience of being sent out to other territories taught me a valuable lesson. George Scott knew I had to learn for myself, so he did what he thought would bring the point home to me. After our talk about Terry Funk's money, George said, "Tony, no matter what you do, stay out of the conversation in those cars."

The business was very different in those days than what it is today. Another piece of advice George gave me was, "If you want to learn about the business, keep your mouth shut and listen." I learned a lot by listening to my fellow babyfaces, but the one thing I wish I had been able to do was

talk more to the heels. Unfortunately, the heels and babyfaces were usually in separate dressing rooms, and we didn't travel together, so the only time we were able to talk to the heels was over the CB [citizen's band] radio when we were on the road.

I met a lot of great talent when I returned to Charlotte. Steve Strong, another bodybuilder, was there when I returned. Steve was a good artist. Before the matches, he would sit in the dressing room and draw portraits of the boys. He didn't stay in the territory long enough for me to get to know him very well, and since he was a heel, we never had the opportunity to travel together. Years later, when I went to Los Angeles, I spent time with him on Muscle Beach. By that time, he was pretty much out of wrestling and was running a t-shirt business on the beach.

Another talent I really respected from that time was the Great Malenko. He was a straight shooter and a really nice guy. We worked together many

times. He was a super athlete and he had tremendous flexibility. He reminded me a lot of Johnny Walker in the way he moved and in his style of wrestling. Malenko had a habit of walking around with one eye shut. I would be talking to him when, suddenly, one of his eyelids would drop down. It was both strange and amazing at the same time.

I considered Ronnie Garvin to be the number one ribber in the business. He was right up there with Mr. Fuji. The first time I met him, he was sitting on the toilet. He reached back, wiped his butt with his hand, and held it out to shake mine.

I had never seen anything like that in Low Moor.

Ronnie, who was a very good pilot, gave me my first ride in a small airplane. Ronnie, Dick Murdoch, Baron von Raschke, and I were flying from Charlotte to Winston-Salem. Within a few minutes of takeoff, Ronnie turned the plane upside down and flew all the way to Winston-Salem in

that position. When we got off the plane, I told him I wouldn't ride with him again if he was going to do that. He assured me it had all been a rib and he wouldn't put me through it again. Sure enough, Ronnie was a man of his word. On the return trip home, he didn't make the trip in an inverted position. Instead, he did flip-flops. I was as sick as I could possibly be when we finally landed.

Ronnie was as wild on the road as he was in the air. The speed limit at the time was 70 mph, and the guys wouldn't ride with you if you drove slower than 75. Most of the guys would drive in excess of 85 mph. I will add that most of them drove safely, and not recklessly, even at excessive speeds. Ronnie, however, would do anything to get a laugh. He drove past me one day at 100 mph … with one leg hanging out the window. His favorite trick, however, was to pull up behind us, ease onto our rear bumper, and push us down the road at 80 miles per hour. Ronnie preferred the element of surprise and often did that on the return trip home when it was dark. We never knew he

was behind us because he would drive with his headlights turned off, and in the pitch darkness, the first indication we had that he was there was when he hit our rear bumper.

When Ronnie was in the ring, however, he was all about business. And yet, not only was he a good worker, he was double-tough in real life. If you got into a fight with Ronnie, you had better pack a lunch. He was as tough as nails and willing to take on anybody.

When it came to finances, Ronnie was as tight as a drum. The boys used to joke that Ronnie graduated from the Ole Anderson School of Thrifty Living. He would carry his gym bag, which held a pair of underwear, socks, and two t-shirts. He also wore blue jeans because they didn't show dirt, which meant he didn't have to wash them as often. When they told the old joke, "his car was so small that I had to sit on his lap," they were talking about Ronnie's car. When two of us would ride with Ronnie, we took turns sitting in the front

passenger seat because the other person had to sit sideways in the back seat.

One time, when I made a trip with Ronnie, he said, "I got a good deal! Twenty dollars for a room at the Motel 6!" That was a good deal, but the room only had one bed, and Ronnie didn't get a cot because there was an extra six-dollar charge. When three of us shared a hotel room, Ronnie would still get a single, because a double cost an additional eight dollars. He said, "There are three places to sleep in a single room: the mattress, the box spring, and the chair. There are only three of us, so why waste money on a double?"

We flipped a coin to see who would sleep where. For some reason, I never got the mattress on the floor.

I joke about Ronnie being frugal, but he always will have my respect. I spent a week on the road with him and only spent $200 on hotels, rental

cars, and food, while everybody else was spending $150 a day. He taught me a lot about being thrifty while on the road.

One night in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, I worked with George "Bunk" Harris. Before the match, George Scott told me, "I want you to shine out there tonight. Bunk is a veteran. Just listen to him and he'll lead you through the match."

The finish of the match was one of the old tried-and-true finishes. Bunk would throw me into the ropes, and then bend over to throw me for a back drop when I rebounded back. When he did, I would leap frog over him, turn around, and as he straightened up and turned around, I would floor him with a drop kick. I would then win the match by putting him out with the sleeper.

The match was supposed to go 15 minutes. For 14 minutes, Bunk pounded the hell out of me. Every time I began to make a comeback, he would say, "Not yet, kid. Not yet."

A few seconds before the 15-minute time limit expired, we went to the finish. When I came back to the dressing room, George Scott said, "Tony, I told you to go out there and shine!"

I didn't know what he meant. I said, "But, George. I used a bottle of baby oil!"

Paul Jones was there and he fell to the ground laughing. I was really green (and dumb).

The next time I wrestled Bunk Harris was on December 18, 1976, in Griffin, Georgia. I wasn't going to let him hold me back again, so I really laid into him. I must have hit him with at least 20 punches.

When I got back to the dressing room, Ole was waiting for me. "Tony, how big are you arms?"

"They're twenty-two inches."

"How much can you bench press?"

"Six hundred pounds."

"How much do you think Bunk Harris can press?"

I thought he was joking, so I said, "I didn't know he worked out."

Ole said, "Well, he doesn't work out, dumbass. And do you know what you just proved? That you're either the biggest punk in the world, or Bunk Harris is the toughest guy around. Who would think that someone who looks like you could punch Bunk Harris and not kill him? You just smartened up the whole damn town."

"But they were cheering," I argued.

"That's not the point. You have to work the people, not let them work you. Just because you hear them cheering doesn't mean you have to do whatever they want. Don't do anything in the ring that you wouldn't do in a real fight. The more punches you throw at Bunk Harris, the weaker you

look. What would happen if your wife punched you twenty times tonight? In the morning, you would have a bruise where she hit you. So how can the people believe that a two-hundred-fifty-pound man with twenty-inch arms can punch a three-hundred-fifty-pound tub of shit twenty times without hurting him?"

As always, what Ole said made a lot of sense.

Ole told me a story about Tex McKenzie. People used to throw things at the ring. Tex was in the ring one night when a fan threw a paper cup. The cup hit Tex in the back of the head and he took a bump outside the ring. I must have heard that story a hundred times. Ole told me, "If you don't feel it, don't sell out." We made sure our punches looked like something." If somebody threw a punch that didn't land, when we got back to the dressing room, Ole would say, "That punch wouldn't have busted a damn grape."

People used to come up and tell me, "Tony, you

wrestled when wrestling was for real." And it was! I don't care what anybody says. We knew where and how to hit. The guys who had talent knew how to hit each other. We never threw a "fake" punch. I can guarantee you that every punch or kick Ole Anderson threw was real. When it came to punches and kicks, we always said, "Lay 'em in," which meant, "Do it for real!" And that was exactly what we meant.

When we got into wrestling, we became a part of the wrestling world. The guys lived their personas outside the ring and away from the arenas. We really became the characters we portrayed on TV and lived those characters 24 hours a day. I became Tony Atlas. When I started in the business, George Scott told me "You will turn into your own personality." That was so true. I didn't have to think about it. I just became who I really was. Johnny Valentine believed he was Johnny Valentine. Richard Fliehr became Ric Flair. When you saw Richard Fliehr in the ring, he was Ric Flair. When you saw Richard Fliehr on

the street, he was Ric Flair. The wrestlers today go back to their hotel room and play on their computers, but in our day, we would go out and party with the fans after a show. Flair would walk into a bar and pick up the tab for everybody. He was the same Nature Boy in the outside world that he was on TV.

When a wrestler throws himself into the business, their true personalities always come to the surface. You can try to be somebody you're not, but you can only pretend so long. Bob Backlund was a good example of that. He should have been a heel because he always had an air of arrogance about him, but he always was a babyface because he was so polite outside. While he should have been a heel all along, it wasn't until late in his career that Vince Jr. turned him. On the opposite spectrum, they tried to make Jimmy Snuka a heel, but it didn't work. He's a natural babyface.

WCW tried to make me a bad guy one time. It didn't work. I'm not a bad guy and there was

nothing they could do to convince people I was. I would cheat, call the people names, insult their mothers … nothing worked. They wanted to like me. That's my nature and people can see through the pretense. "Stone Cold" Steve Austin is another good example. No matter how tough he talked, or how badly he acted, the people liked him. In real life, Stone Cold is the type of person who would give you the shirt off of his back, and America realized that. I don't think this analogy is going to do my career any good, but Vince, Jr. goes out as himself ... and the people don't like him. If you get enough exposure, the people will eventually see through you, so it's important for you to portray what you really are.

Steve Borden was Sting. He made the transformation. With Blackjack Mulligan, what you saw is what you got. Gene and Ole Anderson weren't related, but if you looked at them and watched their mannerisms, you would have thought they were. Ole was the same guy you heard on TV promos. If you ever met him in person, you

couldn't tell the difference.

Actually, on second thought, he's a lot nicer on TV. (Just kidding, Ole)

Khosrow Vaziri became the Iron Sheik. He was so weird, but that's the way the sheiks in his country acted. He knew how Arabs acted, so that's what he did. The characters didn't fit into the real world, but that's why people liked wrestling. They were able to see characters they didn't see in real life. I left the dressing room one night and went into the bathroom. I could see the Iron Sheik's head above one of the toilet stall doors. He was twirling his moustache and slapping himself on his chest like he was King Kong, and shouting, "Excellent! Excellent." I wondered what he was doing, so I pulled open the stall door. A girl was on her knees giving him a blowjob.

Dick Garza, who took on the character of a childlike, shaggy-haired, Polish strongman named

The Mighty Igor, went three years without speaking English. Mr. Wrestling #2 would wear the mask into stores. He even wore his mask into banks! Can you imagine doing that today? Fortunately, back then, just about everybody in Georgia knew who Mr. Wrestling #2 was.

The first time I met Mr. Wrestling #2 [Johnny Walker], I asked him what his name was, but he refused to tell me. When I asked him why, he said, "Because one day you'll forget where you are. I'll be out among the crowd and you'll call me by my real name. Just call me Two."

One day, I heard somebody address him by his real name … Johnny. Sure enough, a few months later, when we were in Columbus, Georgia, he was signing autographs. We were riding together, so I wanted to get his attention and let him know we were going to leave. I yelled out, "Hey, Johnny!" He kept his head down and didn't acknowledge me. To make matters worse, when

he didn't respond, I yelled it out again. Just as the word 'Johnny' left my mouth for the second time, I realized what a blunder I had made.

When we got back to the dressing room, he said, "Now do you see why I didn't want you to know my name?"

I hung my head in shame and apologized. I had so much respect for Johnny because he helped me so much, and I knew what I had done could have hurt his gimmick irreparably.

Johnny taught me something else I will never forget, and a lot of the young wrestlers of today should listen and take heed to what he said. When I asked him for advice on how to improve, he said, "As long as you take what I have to say, and not get mad at me for saying it, I'll tell you. If you get mad at me for something I tell you, I will never tell you anything again. If you cannot take constructive criticism, you cannot learn."

Mil Mascaras, one of the most famous masked wrestlers in the world, very seldom removed his mask. He was with us in Guatemala in 1976 and he always came across as a very polite gentleman. I look at Mascaras, Bruno Sammartino, and Dory Dixon as the most gentleman-like people I've met in the business. They all carried themselves with dignity. Ric Flair was a lot like that, too. There was something special about them that was evident even outside the arenas.

One night, when Mascaras was taking a shower after his match, several of us were waiting by the showers, hoping to see what he looked like. To our dismay, he wore the mask the whole time he showered and didn't take it off until I dropped him off at the airport. He was so protective of his identity that he even worked the boys. He had to take off his mask to get into the airport, so he took it off as he got out of the car. When I turned to look at him, he tried to hide his face from me, but not before I got a glimpse of it.

The point is that none of us shed our characters when we went out into the "real" world. We were wrestlers from the moment we got out of bed until we went to sleep. We lost ourselves in our characters and we became that character. You can't fake that. It was either in you or it wasn't. I can't make you something you're not, no matter how much prompting I do. If it's not there, it's not there.

Perhaps the most blatant example of staying in character took place one night when Tommy Rich and I had some girls in our hotel room. One particular masked man didn't usually fool around, but he must have been horny that night because he walked in and asked, "Is it okay if a mysterious, masked man joins you?"

Eyeing the naked girl on one of our beds, he quickly pulled off his clothes and jumped on top of her … still wearing his mask. There aren't many things which can shock a wrestler because we've seen and done just about everything, but we were

all pretty well speechless during the event. Two minutes later, he was finished. He stood up, and with his mask still in place, he got dressed and walked out. It was so casual, as if he had just stopped by to say hello. Still thunderstruck, Tommy and I looked back and forth at each other, until we finally broke out into loud, raucous laughter. We laughed about that every day for weeks.

I was born Tony White, but when I became Tony Atlas, I forgot about Tony White. Even today, when I sign legal documents, I write Tony Atlas. I even tend to get into character when I'm at home. When I do, my wife says, "The next time you come home, leave Tony Atlas in the ring!"

In the gym, if a guy benched 500 pounds, I had to do 525. I was so into my character that I would think, "I'm Tony Atlas, and Atlas represents strength. I can't allow myself to get beaten."

Ole brought in an arm-wrestling champion for TV

one time, and I beat him. I could not allow him to beat me because it would have reflected badly on the business. Ole said, "That's amazing!" Ole trusted me to win because he knew my background. Shortly before that, I had won the Virginia state arm-wrestling championship in Hopewell. The final match was one of the longest arm wrestling matches anybody had ever seen. I just refused to give up. We tugged and pulled for more than 10 minutes before he finally gave up. Not too long after that, the guy I beat in the final won the world championship in Las Vegas. I didn't have the money to go to Vegas, but he did, so he went. That was right after I beat him.

Someone once asked me if wrestling was fake. I said, "Look around this gym. Everyone here has a different personality, but they all act the same. That's fake. Wrestling gives us the opportunity to be who we really are."

Most of the good heels acted the same way outside the ring that they did on the inside. For

instance, Bill White was one of the tough guys, and he was a bully outside the ring, as well. Bill swears he taught me how to dropkick, but Steve Keirn taught me that when I was just breaking into the business. One night when I was working under a mask as Black Atlas, Bill asked me if I could do a dropkick. I said, "Yes, but not that good."

"Well, you're going to dropkick tonight."

During the match, he called the dropkick spot. When we went back to the dressing room, he told everybody he taught me how to dropkick. Ole spoke up and said, "We taught the kid to dropkick years ago."

Ole ought to know since he was one of the guys who trained me.

A match with Bill was always a stiff match. When Bill threw you into the ropes, he loved to hit you hard when you rebounded off. Ole was stiff, but he would work with you. Gene, on

the other hand, always beat the hell out of you. You would consider yourself lucky if you didn't break a rib when you worked with Johnny Valentine. He didn't know what a working punch was! Every one of those guys would say, "Lay it in, kid." If you didn't hit them hard, they wouldn't sell it. And if you couldn't take care of yourself in the ring, they wouldn't give you anything.

In Charlottesville, Virginia, Johnny Weaver and I were tag team partners against Randy Savage, who was still wrestling as Randy Poffo at the time, and Steve Strong. When we began wrestling, I was working a little bit stiff with Randy. I wasn't conscious of doing it. I worked that way naturally because I was as strong as an ox, and I didn't know what else to do. Randy thought I was shooting, so he tried to take me down, but I blocked him every time. To be honest, I was doing too much showboating. When Randy tagged out, Steve said to both of us, "You guys have to cut that out."

When I looked over at Randy's corner, I could

tell he was hot. As soon as we got back to the dressing room, Johnny Weaver pulled me to the side and said, "Tony, it takes a big man to apologize. I know you weren't at fault, but I wish you would be the bigger man here and apologize, because Randy never will. The boys will think more of you if you do it." I walked right over to Randy, extended my hand, and apologized.

Weaver was my confidant and mentor, and I owe him so much for teaching me, not only about the wrestling business, but about how to be a man.

In February 1976, George Scott sent several of us —Don Kernodle, Roberto Soto, Manny Soto, and another Puerto Rican guy—to Guatemala for a little more than a week. It was great there. The hotel room, which included meals, was six dollars, and I bought a tailor-made suit for 10 dollars.

I dated a girl while I was there. I would take her and her parents out for dinner and treat them well. The country was so poor that you could buy

a great meal for all four people for $15. One day, I went to her house, but her mother wouldn't let me in. "My daughter doesn't date liars," she said. When I asked what she meant, she said, "You told her you aren't rich. You have a house, a TV, and a refrigerator. You're a liar, because you have to be rich to have those things." In Guatemala, you are considered rich if you have the necessities. In the United States, you are only rich if you have more than you need. That's why I'm so patriotic. Even though I have little, in the eyes of so many people in the world, I'm a rich man.

I'll leave out the name of my friend in this story so I don't embarrass him, but while we were in Guatemala, we got horny, so we went out to look for prostitutes. As we were walking up the main street, we saw a young girl with an old woman. As we walked up, the old woman said, "Girl, five dollars."

That was a bargain in any country, and the young girl was a beauty, so I pulled a five-dollar bill

from my wallet and gave it to her. The girl took me by the hand and led me to something that looked like a shed made out of tin. If I didn't know better, I would have thought a child had put it together. It was little more than four poles stuck into the ground with pieces of tin forming the four sides. To get inside, we had to squat and duck walk through a small hole cut into the tin. On the ground in the center of the shed, there was a campfire, and trash was strewn everywhere. There was no running water, either. Once we were inside, the girl squatted over a pail of water, washed herself with a wash cloth, and threw the wash cloth back into the pail.

Yes, I know what you're thinking, which is strange, because I can't even imagine what I could have been thinking. That was absolutely filthy and disgusting. However, us young bucks didn't always do our thinking with the brain in our big head. We just did whatever it took to satisfy those youthful urges that so often overran our sanity.

While I was having sex with the girl, I could hear my friend outside, pleading with the old woman, "Do you have one for me?"

The woman said, "No, only one daughter."

He said, "But I want some, too!"

I began to laugh because my friend sounded so desperate. I think the old woman sensed it, too, because she left. When she came back, she was leading a goat on a leash. "Two dollars for goat," she said.

I couldn't keep going because I was laughing so hard, so I went out and gave the woman a $20 bill. That didn't satisfy her, though. She stayed close behind us, following my friend with the goat. He was fast-walking and trying to get away from her. My friend begged me to not tell the boys that story.

When we had completed our bookings, the promoter asked us to stay longer, but George had

us booked on a show, so we flew back on Tuesday, February 3, 1976. The next day, Steve Keirn and Tiger Conway, Jr. picked us up and drove us to the town. As soon as we were seated in the car, Tiger turned around and asked, "Have you heard what happened in Guatemala?"

"No," I said.

"A major earthquake hit and killed more than 20,000 people."

We missed the Guatemala earthquake of 1976 by a matter of hours.

George Scott's main goal was to make me independent. He didn't want me to rely on anybody else. I bought my first car from George, a 1972 Oldsmobile Delta 88, which at one time had belonged to his wife. Each week, he deducted the payments from my paycheck.

Not too long after I bought the car, I made George

mad. While driving my car, I saw a 1969 Cadillac El Dorado. It was blue, with wide whitewall tires and a white vinyl top. I could see myself driving into my mother's driveway in that car. The Oldsmobile had more than 100,000 miles on it, and George's wife hadn't taken care of it, so the paint was faded and chipped. The El Dorado had less than 70,000 miles and it had been taken care of. The most striking feature of the El Dorado that caught my eye, however, was the figure of Atlas, bent over with the world on his back, on the front of the hood. It didn't take much to convince myself that I needed to trade the Oldsmobile for the Cadillac.

The first thing I did was buy a can of Armor All® and spray it all over the leather seats, tires, and vinyl top. I did that every day without fail. Those seats were as slippery as an eel. Every time I see Don Kernodle, he reminds me about how I would make a right turn, and everybody would slide to the left side of the car. When I turned left, everybody slid in the other direction.

There is a story about the El Dorado that Bill Howard likes to tell every time he gets an opportunity. One night, Bill and Klondike Bill played a joke on a policeman. I had just bought the El Dorado. I was driving back to Atlanta from Rome, Georgia. It was one of the first times I had driven at night on curvy roads. A car coming towards me was in the proper lane, but the roads were so curvy that it looked like the headlights were headed directly towards me on my side of the road, so I swerved to avoid him and drove off the side of the road into a ditch. We didn't have cell phones back then. The boys used CB radios, but I didn't have one, so I had to get out of the car and walk to the nearest town.

After I left, Bill Howard and Klondike drove by. When they saw my car in the ditch, they turned around and parked on the shoulder of the road. A few minutes later, a county sheriff arrived on the scene. He looked just like Sheriff Buford T. Justice, Jackie Gleason's character in the movie Smokey and the Bandit. He was the epitome of the

stereotypical fat, redneck, southern sheriff. He was the type of guy the movies would have you believe were fictional characters. In reality, however, those characters were probably based on real-life people.

The sheriff got out of his car and asked Bill where the driver of the car was. Now, you have to remember what the attitude of white southerners was towards blacks in the 1970s. They thought we were all freshly imported from the deepest, darkest recesses of the jungles of Africa. Bill Howard said "Well, you know, those damn coons always climb trees. He may be in a tree."

The sheriff went down into the woods and looked up into the trees

When I got back to the scene of the accident with a tow truck, Bill Howard was standing on the side of the road. He looked excited and said, "Tony, Tony! You've gotta play along with us. Go get up in that tree."

"Get up in the tree? For what?"

When Bill explained the story, I did exactly what he told me to do. Sure enough, the sheriff eventually discovered me in the tree. When he did, he began to yell, "Here he is! Here he is, boys! Hey, you! Get down out of that tree. Come down here afore I sic the dogs on ya!"

It was funny, but I remember thinking, "I hope he don't get so excited that he shoots me."

Bill and Klondike were both on the ground, laughing. Bill Howard had tears in his eyes from laughing so hard. They finally walked over to the sheriff and said, "Don't worry about him, sheriff. We'll take care of him. He's our boy."

The tow truck pulled my car out of the ditch. There was a big dent in the door where the car ran up against the tree, but it was drivable. We laughed about that for a long time. That sheriff was so funny, and the look on his face was

something you just had to see to believe. He was so proud that he had found me. It was probably the biggest thing he ever did. He was just a "good ol' boy." He kept pulling up his pants, sticking out his chest, and strutting around like a rooster. I wish everybody could have heard him. "I've got 'im! I've got 'im! Come on down here, boy!"

One of the wrestlers I really liked was Dean Ho [Dean Higuchi]. Dean was a prominent bodybuilder during the 1950s, winning the "Mr. Hawaiian Islands" title in 1956 and finishing in sixth place in the Mr. America competition. He later opened a gym in Hawaii which became a popular training center for both bodybuilders and professional wrestlers.

People don't realize how strong Dean Ho was. I walked into the dressing room one night to find him sitting there by himself, bending threepenny nails with his bare hands. When Dean and Ricky Steamboat were tag team partners, they went with me on one of my first trips in the El Dorado. The

three of us met in the parking lot and we put our suitcases on the ground behind the car. I put everybody's bag in the trunk and we left. At least, I thought I had put everybody's bag in the trunk. I put everybody's bag into the trunk … but mine. When we got to the arena, I didn't have any wrestling gear. The funny thing about it was, when we got back to the motel, my bag was still sitting where I had left it.

Dean Ho also was with me one day when a cop pulled me over in Marietta, Georgia. I had been clocked doing 135 mph. The first words out of the cop's mouth were, "What the hell do you have under that hood?" The fine was $100 and I had to pay it on the spot. Unfortunately, I only had $80 on me. Dean didn't have any money with him at all, so the cop said they would have to hold me until I paid the other $20. I threw the keys to Dean and he went to get the money I needed.

Most of the time, even when we got locked up, the police didn't keep us for too long. That was

really strange. If we had the misfortune to be put into jail up north, they would have thrown away the key, but in the south, they put us on ice just long enough to send a message.

Tommy Rich got arrested one night for being belligerent to a sheriff's deputy. Tommy, Johnny Rich, Nick Patrick, and I were on our way home from a show. We were smoking weed and singing country music when the deputy pulled us over for speeding. When Tommy opened his window, a big cloud of smoke bellowed out into the deputy's face. "Are you boys smokin' marijuana or something?"

Tommy said, "I ain't smokin' nothin'!"

When he asked Tommy to step out of the car, Tommy said, "Do you know who I am? I'm Wildfire Tommy Rich! I'll kick your ass!"

We were all laughing because we were messed up, too. When Tommy got out of the car, he fell on

his ass. As he stood up, he accused the cop of hitting him and knocking him down. Tommy kept calling him names and cursing him until the cop had enough and decided to take him to jail. After they left, Johnny, Nick and I all went to the Waffle House to eat breakfast. We thought we would give Tommy time to cool off before we went to the police station. An hour or so later, we went to pick him up. When we walked in, the sheriff said, "Please, take him home!" Tommy was still sloppy drunk and he had vomited all over his cell. When he saw me, he said, "Whoop 'im, T! Kick his ass!" He wanted me to fight the sheriff in his office. The only thing the sheriff wanted was for us to take him off his hands so he could have some peace and quiet. When we got out to Tommy's car, he insisted we let him drive. "It's my car. I can drive if I want." He kept on until we let him drive. What a night that was.

I made an 80-mile trip with Thunderbolt Patterson one night. He smoked one joint after another. Every time headlights would appear

behind us, he would pull an aerosol can out of the glove compartment and spray the car. However, he never drove faster than 55 mph. He told me, "Anytime you smoke, always have your spray can, and keep your speed under the limit."

On the way to Rome, Georgia, one day, Tommy and I pulled up beside Thunderbolt's car. It was filled with smoke so thick that I will never know how he could even see to drive. He didn't believe in letting out the smoke, but somehow, he made it home every night.

One Sunday afternoon, I got thrown in jail for speeding. I was the only person in the jail and the deputy couldn't get in touch with the judge. He told me he was "fishin' down at the river." He kept coming to the back to check on me: "Is there anything I can get ya ... a cup of coffee, a soda?" He would leave for awhile, come back, leave for awhile, and come back. He finally asked, "Who do you work for?"

When I told him, he called the wrestling office. I don't know who he talked to, but it was probably Charlie Smith or Ole. The next thing I know, I heard him hang up the phone. He came to the back, unlocked my cell, and said, "You're free to go. Slow that thing down, boy."

Everybody talks about how mean the southern cops were in those days. I never saw that side of them. As long as we acted halfway decent, most of them treated us pretty well.

Somewhere in the area between Charlotte and Raleigh, there was a police officer named Agwater, or something like that. He sat on the side of the highway every Tuesday, just waiting for one of us to drive by. The first time I met him, I was riding with Johnny Weaver. Johnny talked for several minutes, trying his best to get out of the ticket. It didn't work, though. When we got back on the road, he said, "I just wasted fifteen minutes trying to get out of that ticket."

The first time Agwater pulled me over, I was talking to Skip Young and not paying attention. I forgot about the fact that he was probably waiting. Agwater smiled and said, "Oh, good! I finally got you."

Most of the time, the ticket process only took a minute or two. This is the God's honest truth. Agwater would have a ticket written out with a wrestler's name and information before we got there. All he had to do was write down the speed and have us sign our name. He got everybody. The wrestlers who worked in the Charlotte territory might not have known who the vice-president of the United States was, but every one of them knew who Agwater was.

I eventually traded the El Dorado for a 1977 Lincoln Town Car through a rent-to-buy dealership. My car note was $600 a month. The guys told me I paid $1,000 more than I would have if I had bought the car from a regular automobile dealer. Of course, they didn't consider the fact that

I didn't have to pay a registration or inspection fee, and if anything went wrong with the car, the rent-to-buy dealer would make the repairs. It worked out to my benefit because I had several problems with the carburetor and fuel hoses.

Tim Woods, who wrestled as Mr. Wrestling #1, was a sweetheart. What a nice man he was. I made a lot of trips with him. He was into stock car racing. He owned and raced an Oldsmobile 442. One day, he let me drive it. It was like driving a rocket ship. It had so much power. All you had to do was tap the gas and it took off. I never felt that much power in a car in my life. I was sweating the whole time.

The first time my dad came to see me wrestle, I was in Richmond. I was so excited about him being there. I was supposed to wrestle Jack Evans that night. Every time I worked with Jack, he put me over. That night, however, George Scott had sent word that I was supposed to put Jack over.

That took every bit of wind out of my sails. I wanted to look good for my dad, and on that particular night, of all nights, I was supposed to lose to Jack Evans, who never beat anybody. I raised all kinds of hell in the dressing room. By that time in my career, I was still respectful of authority to a degree, but my temperament was beginning to show itself from time to time. Unfortunately, it always went off at the wrong time, and that night was definitely the wrong time to show my ass.

Jack was one of the wrestlers we called jobbers, under-card wrestlers who traveled from territory to territory and spent their entire career putting over guys like me. They never (or at least, seldom) complained, and for the most part, accepted the role they played in the business. The truth be known, if it weren't for people like Jack Evans, who made people like me look like a million dollars, there wouldn't be a Tony Atlas, or for that matter, a Hulk Hogan.

The boys all told me it must be a mistake. Even Jack showed how much bigger of a man he was than me when he said, "You don't have to put me over, Tony." I don't remember who the agent-in-charge was that night, but he said, "The office said to put him over, Tony, so you've gotta put him over. There's nothing wrong with doing a job. It's all in how you do it."

All I heard after that was, "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." We had our match and I put Jack over.

For the rest of the week, the boys let me have it. "How many times did Jack put you over and never complain? They ask you to do one job and you pitched a fit."

George Scott told me, "It was a mistake, Tony. You were supposed to go over, but you can't dwell on it and walk around with a long face." I don't think it was a mistake. I really think George Scott did it to test me, but that never dawned on me at the time. I think they used Jack

Evans to teach me a lesson. They knew that one day in the future, when I was an established main eventer, I would be asked to "do the job" for somebody else, and they wanted me to be ready to do it. In other words, it was a training process they used to keep guys like me from getting a swelled head.

If the wrestling office had issued a report card for that lesson, I would have received an "F" for my work. In fact, looking back on the incident, if there was a grade lower than an "F," I should have gotten that grade because I acted shamefully. Jack had put me over at least 10 times before that, and he never complained. My reasoning was that my dad was there to see me, and that was the first time I had seen him since I was 12 years old, but that was no excuse to act like I did.

I can't think of anything negative to say about Jim Crockett. He had a good territory and he treated me like gold. I was blessed to be in Charlotte when Dusty Rhodes, Wahoo McDaniel, and Johnny

Valentine were on fire. They didn't need any fireworks. In our day, the wrestlers created excitement on their own. The first time I heard the crowd stamping the ground with their feet, it scared the hell out of me. I thought we were having an earthquake. It was just the people letting us know they were ready for the show to begin.

We were on the sweetest loop of all. The guys all stayed in Charlotte, and on Monday, they ran Charlotte at the Park Center. On Tuesday, we did a house show in Raleigh, and we stayed overnight for TV the next day. From there, we went to Norfolk, Richmond, and Roanoke. Once a month, we worked a show in Greensboro at four o'clock on Sunday afternoon—a 90-mile trip from Charlotte—while the rest of the guys, like Rufus, had to make the 440-mile trip from Norfolk to Charleston, South Carolina. Rufus very rarely saw Richmond.

I enjoyed my time on the road in the Charlotte territory, and in the years ahead, I never found a

territory in which I didn't like traveling. I enjoyed seeing the sights and being with the boys. We would make 500-mile trips and spend hours in the cars, but we entertained ourselves more than we entertained the wrestling fans. We would race, make bets, and do all kinds of crazy things to make each other laugh. We never sat still and just drove. We listened to the old stories about the veteran wrestlers who were no longer in the business. We smoked weed. We were like outlaws. Johnny Weaver and I used to ride and listen to Willie Nelson sing Red Headed Stranger over and over! We rode down the highway and the car was our horse.

A lot of the guys hated the trips in Oklahoma, but I enjoyed them. Even though the trips there were long, we knew every inch of that state. You couldn't get Junkyard Dog, Ted DiBiase, or Buck Robley lost in Oklahoma. They could drive through Oklahoma blindfolded. Sure, there were downsides to being on the road for hours at a time, but the guys today miss a lot of the fun we had

between New York and Baltimore, or Charlotte and Raleigh. From our cars, we saw farms, houses, small towns, mountains, and the sky. We knew where to find the best restaurants, gyms, bars, and hotels. We would stop at restaurants that were no bigger than a large living room and get the best barbeque we ever ate in our lives. That's why I can't understand why the guys say so many bad things about traveling in those days. We had a lot of fun.

Charlotte was a great territory in regards to payoffs, too. In 1977, the top guys were making $2,000 a week. I don't know whether or not it's true, but I was told nobody in the territory was making less than $70,000 a year. That was a lot of money considering the price of an average home in the area was $25,000, and the price of a Cadillac DeVille was $9,000. When gas prices jumped from 60 cents a gallon to 80 cents, Johnny Weaver told me, "If this keeps up, it'll be one dollar a gallon, and when that happens, I'll get me a bicycle."

We all laughed at him and said, "No way!"

Chapter 8
Black Atlas

In November 1976, George Scott sent me to Atlanta, a territory known for having good workers and where I could get the experience I needed. At the time, Thunderbolt Patterson was the top black wrestler in the territory. Ole Anderson, the booker for the territory, told me, "Tony, you're here to learn how to wrestle. Don't be looking for a top position. We already have our top black wrestler … Thunderbolt Patterson. He's a big draw and nobody is going to take his place."

Ole knew that George Scott's long-range plan was to bring me back to Charlotte to work on top, so he put me under a mask and called me the Black Atlas. He knew I was still learning to work, so he decided to hide my identity in case I did something

stupid that might hurt my reputation.

As the Black Atlas, I worked with a lot of good talent, and due to my physique, I began to get over a little bit, so Ole couldn't really job me out. It's hard to beat a guy who weighs 250 pounds, and who has 20-inch arms and a 28-inch waist. I did a few jobs to top guys like the Stomper [Archie Gouldie], but most of them were by disqualification, rather than being pinned in the middle of the ring.

Wearing the mask and protecting my identity took some getting used to. Wearing a mask was second nature to wrestlers like Mil Mascaras and Mr. Wrestling #2, who wore their masks all the time, even in the dressing rooms when they were only around the boys. I had a harder time remembering the things a masked man needed to remember.

For instance, Tommy Rich tells a story about stopping to pick me up at my motel. When he pulled up in front of my room, a girl walked out

wearing a red mask. Right behind her was a girl wearing a blue mask, followed by another girl wearing a black mask. I walked out next … but I wasn't wearing a mask. The boys spread that story around for a long time.

Before I went to Atlanta, I had a "Tony Atlas" t-shirt made with my barefaced photograph emblazoned on the front. I remembered to wear my mask into the arena … but I also wore the t-shirt. Paul Jones will never let me live down that one.

Having to wear the mask taught me a lot about working. For one thing, the mask blocked my peripheral vision. I couldn't see anything on the side, and even when I twisted my head to look behind me, it was hard to see anything. The mask also hid any facial expressions I might make. Without the mask, you can grimace and contort your face so the people can see the pain you are undergoing. When they can't see your face, the only thing you can use to sell the emotion

of the match is your body. It's much tougher to make your feelings known to the crowd, so you have to work harder to get those emotions across.

The first night I wore the mask, I borrowed one from one of the wrestlers. I don't remember who gave it to me, but everybody used to carry masks in their suitcases. They did that in case somebody didn't show up. When that happened, one of the guys could put on a mask, wear a long-sleeve wrestling outfit, and call himself the Masked Marvel or something.

Since I was still in the learning process, the veterans would all play jokes on me, like twisting the mask around when we were in the ring. That took me off-guard a few times, but due to my amateur wrestling background, I was able to work using the sense of touch. When a guy twisted my mask and expected me to panic, he was caught off guard when I continued to carry the match to him. That happened to Bill White, who liked to turn the masks all the way around. When I

continued to work, he was shocked.

When I first met Ole Anderson, he didn't intimidate me. I'm not trying to take anything away from him. He was a tough guy, but I had seen tougher before I got into the business. He was no different from the guys I hung around with on the streets. Having said that, there's something I want everyone to know. Just about everything I learned about the wrestling business, that I didn't learn from Johnny Weaver, I learned from Ole Anderson. He was like a stepfather. In fact, with my family situation being what it was, Ole was more like my real father. I love that man. You may not like the way Ole presents himself, but he's honest and straightforward, and you never have to second-guess him. Everything he ever told me was true. Ole is the man who made Tony Atlas.

Just about everyone in the territory behaved because Ole ran the roost. I liked that because he reminded me of my old high-school coach. I played a lot of sports, so I was raised with

coaches. My coaches always told me what they thought. They didn't sugarcoat their comments. When I did something wrong, I expected to get cursed out. In the business, Ole was like a coach. If I did something wrong, either in the ring or outside of it, Ole would meet me at the dressing room door. He didn't bite his lip, mince words, or beat around the bush. He would get in my face, come straight to the point, and tell me what I needed to hear. "Look, kid. You're fuckin' up! Straighten your fuckin' ass out. Get your goddamn head on straight or I'll whip your ass."

He knew he couldn't do it, but he would tell me that, anyway. "I'll whip your black ass, you fuckin' piece of shit! Who the fuck do you think you are?"

When I look at my career, the WWF was the greatest thing that ever happened to me, but then again, it was the worst. When Ole was in charge, he let me know what I was doing wrong in no

uncertain terms. Vince, Jr. wouldn't say anything. I never knew whether I was doing good or doing bad. That was as it should be. Vince paid his talent a professional wage, and in turn, he expected us to conduct ourselves professionally. His focus was on running a wrestling business … not a daycare for immature adults.

In my opinion, the most important thing Ole taught me was respect. I was in the Augusta, Georgia, dressing room one night when Ole was going over a finish, explaining exactly how he wanted a particular match to turn out. He was talking to his partner, Gene, my partner, and me. By that time, I had been wrestling for more than three years, during a time when we wrestled every night, and sometimes twice a day. We might have had 10 nights off a year, so for 355 days a year, we wrestled. It was 1979, and I had been around for three years. I wasn't the green wrestler I had been. I said, "Ole, I've got an idea."

The whole dressing room got quiet. Everybody stopped talking all at once. It was so quiet you could hear a rat piss on cotton. Ole and Gene both stood up at the same time, picked up my chair, with me still in it, and set it in a corner of the room … with me facing the corner. Gene said, "Son, you haven't been in this business long enough to make a suggestion."

For the rest of the night, I heard the same tune from everybody in the dressing room. That was how the old-timers felt about the business. If you had only been wrestling for three or four years, you weren't allowed to make any suggestions. It was as if I had disrespected the guys by opening my mouth and trying to tell them what to do. It's not like that today. I've been in dressing rooms where guys with one-year experience think they know everything about the business.

My favorite story about Ole took place when we were working out at the Charlotte YMCA. A lot of people don't know it, but Ole had a 500-pound

bench and 20-inch arms. A black belt in karate was practicing there. Every day, he would tell Ole how wrestling was fake … until Ole finally got tired of it. Ole walked over and said, "What would you do against a guy like me?"

The guy extended the knuckles on his hands and said, "Well, I'd strike the solar plexus."

Ole said, "What?"

He said, "I'd hit you in the solar plexus. The biggest guy in the world would go down because he couldn't take that punch."

Ole said, "Well, I don't know about that. I have a pretty damn strong stomach."

The guy turned around and continued with his workout. A few minutes later, Ole walked back to the guy and said, "I think you're full of shit. I have a pretty damn strong stomach. Why don't you just see what you can do with that punch to my solar plexus you're talking about, and see what it does to

me."

The guy said, "Well, you're gonna get hurt. At the very least, you'll be gasping for breath."

Ole says, "I doubt it. Just give me the best shot you've got. I've got my stomach as tight as I can make it."

The guy stretched out his hand and knuckles, like he was measuring the distance. Ole stepped back and said, "Wait a minute! You can't do that. Are you telling me that if you're in a fight, you're gonna measure the distance to my stomach and then throw your punch? Just throw your damn punch."

Ole leaned forward slightly and tightened his stomach muscles as tight as he could. "Go ahead and give it your best shot."

The guy drew back and hit Ole in the stomach with everything he had. As he pulled back his hand, his mouth flew open. He looked like he was

going to cry. Ole grinned, lifted his sweatshirt, pulled a 10-pound barbell plate from the waistband of his sweat pants, and dropped it to the floor. It landed with a loud CLANG! Ole said, "I don't care how much of that karate bullshit you know. You should never trust anybody in a fight."

I can testify to that story because I was there when it happened. The guy drilled the plate and broke his hand.

Another story Ole told in his biography, Inside Out, was about Larry Hennig and me. I'm surprised Ole even remembered it, but every bit of that story is true. One night, while I was wrestling in Orlando, Bob Roop said, "We're gonna put you in a handicap match against Larry "The Ax" Hennig." I was going to be teaming with a Japanese wrestler. At first, I didn't understand why they would put two of us against one. At that time, I only weighed about 225. The Japanese guy was about 180, but he was 6-foot-2. I told the Japanese guy, "That don't make no sense. The two

of us against one guy? We're gonna look silly."

A few minutes later, as I looked out the dressing room door, I saw Larry Hennig standing in the ring. He was huge. He looked like a grizzly bear. I went back to Bob and said, "Hey, Bob. Do you think maybe I can have one more guy on my team?"

He laughed and said, "No. Get out there and get him."

Larry wasn't as big as I had first thought. As I walked to the ring, the closer I got to him, the bigger he got. What a huge man. He was a spectacle.

Sometime during the match, Larry bent me forwards and whacked me in the center of my back, sending me crashing to the mat. He leaned over and whispered, "Kid! Hey, kid! Don't go down when I hit you. Get up." I was still green to the business, but I knew Larry wanted me to look

strong. He wanted me to stay on my feet so the people would think I was indestructible.

Then he hit me again. I went down. I didn't have a choice. He could have dropped an ox with the hammer-blow he hit me with. "Come on, Tony. Get up."

When I stood up, Larry told me to make my chest muscles jump. How was I going to do that? He had hit me so hard in the chest that one of my pecs felt like it was lying down around my ankles. The other one was up around my ears. I couldn't have bounced my pecs to save my life.

I think the worst mistake both WCW and Jimmy Crockett made was when they got rid of Ole. As the booker, Ole built WCW. In that little-bitty state of Georgia, Ole made Georgia Championship Wrestling one of the top-rated shows on Ted Turner's WTBS network. Every time Ole quit, business in the territory dropped. In my opinion, the executives in WCW and WTBS should be

ashamed of themselves for the way they treated that man at the end of his career. Ole had more talent in his little finger than most of us had in our whole body. There is a lot of knowledge floating around in his head.

The one question I'm going to ask Ole the next time I see him is, "Did you ever buy a new car?" That man was tight with his money. I saw him wearing new cowboy boots one time. I said, "Ole, where'd you get those new boots?"

"Oh, somebody gave 'em to me."

I laughed about him being so tight with a dollar, but he was smart with his money.

Between Ole Anderson and Johnny Weaver, I learned a lot. Unfortunately, I didn't realize what good advice Ole and Johnny were giving me until my career was over, and then it was too late. Ole was constantly on my back. If I had listened to what he was trying to tell me during that time ... but

I'm getting ahead of myself.

Jim Barnett and Ole Anderson changed a lot of things with Georgia Championship Wrestling. They began to bring in all the young talent and put them on top.

I got my big break in Atlanta when Abdullah the Butcher came back from a tour of Japan. As a rule, Abdullah would spend six months in Japan and six months in the States. When he went to a new territory, it only took two to three weeks of advertisement and promotion to get him over, while it took months for other wrestlers to really get over with the people. Andre the Giant, Bruiser Brody, and Dusty Rhodes were all quick moneymakers for promoters. On the other hand, guys like Johnny Valentine took six months to get over, but he could make money for a promoter for several years, while Abdullah and the others drew well for about a year before their lights began to dim.

Thunderbolt Patterson had been working a long program with Dick Slater, so Ole asked him to work with Abdullah. Thunderbolt, however, refused to do it. Even if Thunderbolt had been willing, neither he nor Abdullah would have agreed to do the job [lose the match], so Ole said, "Then we'll keep you with Slater."

Thunderbolt didn't like that idea, either, and refused. His exact words were, "I've beat that white boy up enough. I don't wanna wrestle him any more." Ole found himself saddled with a top guy who was unwilling to work with anybody. At that point, Abdullah, who had been listening, stepped in and said, "Ole, give me the kid for a couple of months."

The kid Abdullah was referring to, of course, was me. At the time, I was still wrestling under a mask as the Black Atlas, but I was scheduled to return to Charlotte within a few weeks. Ole took me aside and said, "I'm gonna put you in a program with Abdullah and we'll see how things go."

Our program began on a night when Abdullah was wrestling Tommy Rich in the Atlanta City Auditorium. At the time, they had no plans to keep Tommy. They brought him in from Memphis to do a series of jobs for Abdullah and to get juice [blood], which was always a highlight of Abdullah's matches. Ole knew Tommy could get sympathy from the fans, especially the young girls, because he was a good-looking, handsome, young man. When Tommy walked out into the arenas, every girl in the building swooned. It was as if Elvis had walked into the arena. That's not an exaggeration. That's an absolutely accurate description of what took place when Tommy made an appearance.

As soon as Tommy got into the ring, Abdullah began pounding the hell out of him. For some reason, Tommy didn't want to do the blade job himself, so Abdullah did it for him. When Abdullah finished slicing and dicing, Tommy's face was covered in blood. At the time, Tommy was nice and slim, and he had blond, near-white,

hair. When he began to bleed, his blond hair turned bright red, and the women went nuts. Before we knew it, the wrestling fans were coming to the ring. It was a spontaneous reaction to what they saw in the ring. In the late ‘70s, the fans still believed some of what was happening, so they would often rush to the ring and get involved. When Ole saw that begin to happen, he got worried. He came into the dressing room and told me, "Get out there and run Abdullah off, Tony. We’re about to have a riot on our hands." I did as Ole said and ran to the ring as fast as I could. When Abdullah saw me, he scooted out and headed for the dressing room.

The next morning, Abdullah was wrestling Tommy Rich again on TV, and once again, Ole told me to make the save. When I got into the ring, Abdullah said, "Get on me, kid." Abdullah was scared because the people were ready to come to the ring again. Tommy couldn’t help. He knew better than to get up, because once he did, all the heat would be gone. After hitting Abdullah a few

times, he said, "Slam me."

I was shocked because Abdullah had never been body slammed, but Abdullah knew that after he hit the mat, he could just roll out of the ring and slink off to the dressing room. Following his instructions, I picked him up, turned him over, and slammed him to the mat. As he fell, he grabbed my mask and accidentally pulled it off. When he landed, his hand went up into the air and he released the mask, sending it sailing over the top rope and into the audience. I had a thick afro at the time, but my head looked really small when I was wearing the mask. When the mask came off, my afro literally exploded outwards. It was like a magician's trick. It was as if somebody had instantaneously blown up a balloon made of wooly hair and placed it on my head. At one moment in time, he holds nothing in his hands, and then suddenly, he holds a thick bouquet of flowers at his fingertips.

The people in the audience couldn't believe what

they had just witnessed. Nobody had ever taken a fight to Abdullah like I had. Nobody had ever slammed him, either. And on top of it all, they reacted like crazy to my unmasking and the appearance of my afro. In those days, hair was important. Big hair, like my Afro, was the in-thing. Tommy Rich's long, blond hair also was highly noticeable, so between the two of us, we were as hip to that generation as we possibly could be.

When we got to the back, Ole said, "Having the mask come off accidentally is probably the best thing that could have happened. With your freaky body, it's hard to keep your identity a secret, anyway."

That was so true. There weren't many people with a build like mine, and when I went to the gym, or walked down the street, my walk gave it away. People have talked about my walk my whole life. Even today, people comment on the way I walk. Just last year, I went to a gym in New

York City. A young bodybuilder was watching me walk through the gym. He walked up and said, "You're Tony Atlas, aren't you?"

"Yeah. How did you recognize me?"

"There's only one person who walks like that, and that's Tony Atlas."

There also was the problem with girls. Most of my fans were females, and most of them knew where we lived. I couldn't get away from them. I don't have that problem now. The problem I have now is getting one to come to me. A young lady bumped into me at the gym the other day and said, "Excuse me."

I said, "Oh, no. Don't excuse yourself. The only way I can get a pretty girl to bump into me now is by accident." That made her laugh.

But that was a real problem for a masked man who was trying to keep his identity a secret. People saw me at the gym. They saw me

leaving the arena with the boys. Wearing a mask was almost a 24-7 routine, although only a few wrestlers really took that to heart and lived the gimmick.

Once again, I have to praise Ole Anderson for his business judgment. He was good at changing things in midstream. Even though he came across as being boastful, both in and out of the ring, Ole had no ego. He would personally get into the ring and do a job if the occasion called for it. And even when he worked on top, if a program with other wrestlers was hot, he would take a backseat and put that program on top. He was in the wrestling business for one thing, and one thing only: money. In this case, Ole had already booked himself into a several-week-long program with me, but when he saw the reaction of the crowd when I slammed Butcher, he was willing to step aside and give his spot to Abdullah in order to draw money. Since I was supposed to return to Charlotte later that month, Ole called George Scott and told him, "That kid just got over last night. If

it's okay with you, I need to keep him a bit longer than we planned."

I am so thankful George allowed me to stay because, from that day on, I was made. My career took off right there in the Atlanta territory.

Two weeks after I slammed Abdullah, I was wrestling in a tag team match against Ole and Gene Anderson. Before the match, Ole told me, "Tonight, I want to try something. I want you to slam me, but I want you to press me high over your head and drop me from there."

Sometime during the match, Ole called for the slam. I picked Ole up, pressed him overhead, and sent him crashing to the mat. The people popped and came up out of their seats. Seeing the reaction we got from the crowd, Ole signaled for Gene to run in. Gene said, "Slam me." I did. Ole stood up and said, "Slam me again, kid."

I must have slammed Ole and Gene five times

each, and the crowd reaction was as enthusiastic for the final slam as it was for the first. When we got back to the dressing room, Ole said, "I want you to do that slam in every match."

That was the origin of the press slam, and once again, the credit for the idea goes to Ole Anderson. Later, it dawned on me that the press slam was a lot like something I had seen in the movies when I was a kid. When Steve Reeves would fight his enemies in the Hercules movies, he would pick up his opponents, press them over his head, and throw them.

At first, the guys were apprehensive about taking the press slam. I had to tell them to not help me. It used to make me mad when guys would jump up for the press slam. I hated it when they did that. I wanted to bring them up myself because I was strong enough to do it. That's what made my press slam stand out. All my opponents had to do was hold their hands out to the side. I wanted the people to see that. In those days, the fans weren't

smart like they are today, but even then, they knew the guys were helping each other by doing things like jumping up when somebody wanted to lift them into a slam position. On the other hand, they could also tell when I was doing the work all by myself. Even when the guys let me push them overhead, they would often put their hand on my shoulder because they were afraid to go up. They would push themselves off, or do something else to screw up the process. In the late '70s, nobody was taking bumps from that height. As far as I know, that was the first bump taken from that high up in the air. I'm 6-foot-2, so when I lifted someone up overhead, they would be making a seven-foot drop out of the air.

Hulk Hogan didn't like going up for my power slam. He wasn't used to being taken off his feet, so he didn't go up easily. When you weigh 300 pounds or more, you don't have to take big bumps, and when I put him up, he didn't know how to react. A magazine featured a picture of me pressing him. If you look at the picture, you'll see

that he was grabbing my trunks and my arm pit. He did everything in his power to stay on the ground.

At WrestleMania II on April 7, 1986, I was in a 20-man battle royal with William "Refrigerator" Perry. I picked him up and he got so scared. He said, "Don't you know this is staged?"

I said, "Don't worry. I won't hurt you."

He was so light! He weighed more than 300 pounds, but I was so strong that I didn't feel him.

The only other regular finishing hold I used was the sleeper, although I used a few other finishers when I wrestled the lighter guys because I wanted people to know I could do more than just press people up over my head. Terry Funk was the one who gave me that idea. As a rule, I only used the press slam when I wrestled guys who weighed more than 270 pounds. If I could press 400 pounds over my head, how could I impress people by press slamming a 250-pound man? If you weighed

270 pounds or more, you were definitely going up, but if you were under that, I beat you some other way. I would beat the lighter guys with a headbutt, or a swinging full nelson.

I learned one finishing move when I was wrestling Lanny Poffo. We used to catch our opponent with a flying head scissors and then flip downwards, ending up with our opponent in a headlock. One night, as I went down, I noticed his leg was within reach. I realized that if I hooked my arm behind his knee cap on the way down to the mat, I could roll him up and finish in a pinning position.

The people really wanted to see me pick up big guys like Hulk Hogan and Big John Studd. When I would look out into the audience, I would see the people holding their hands up over their heads and shouting, "Pick him up! Pick him up!" Hogan saw me do that in Georgia when he was wrestling as Sterling Golden. I would look out at the crowd and pump my hands in the air a couple of times, as

if to ask, "Do you want me to pick him up?" When the crowd responded, I would lift my opponent up over my head and hold him there for a few seconds before going through with the press slam.

When Hogan went to the WWF in 1979, he cupped his hand to his ear in order to draw out cheers from the audience. That became one of his signature moves. He borrowed that move from me. I was doing that in 1978 when we were both wrestling in Georgia. I can't take credit for it, though. I took it from Dusty Rhodes … and he got it from Thunderbolt Patterson. There's a passage of scripture in Ecclesiastes 1 that says, "There's nothing new under the sun." That holds very true in wrestling. When we saw guys do things which got them over, we copied them in other territories.

When I first started wrestling, George Scott told my why he wanted me to use the sleeper. "With your arms, people will believe you can squeeze a man until he falls out."

There were a lot of 20-inch arms back then—Superstar Billy Graham, Omar Atlas, Ole Anderson, Ric Flair, Hulk Hogan—but there weren't many wrestlers in those days who had 23-inch arms. There aren't many wrestlers who have them today, either. I don't want to sound like I'm bragging, but I still have the biggest arms in the business. There's nobody who has big arms like that today. Even Triple H, who is a big man, doesn't have big arms.

After Abdullah the Butcher unmasked me, I wrestled as Tony Atlas, and Ole booked the two of us in a match for the following week.

One of the things Ole wanted me to do that night was juice. The idea of getting blood didn't bother me because I was an old jock who had many bloody noses and broken bones as a kid, but at the time, I didn't know how to get juice, so I asked Abdullah to do it to me. He was an expert. The only problem was that when he finished, he did it so expertly that I had nothing to show the fans. I

couldn't even find the scar when I looked into a mirror in the dressing room. I thought the notable lack of a scar would expose the business, so I rushed to the car after the match in order to avoid meeting any wrestling fans who might question it.

Even though blood didn't bother me, I wasn't too crazy about the idea of cutting myself. The next week, Abdullah took the time to teach me how to use the blade. He even made me practice it.

After I got my first juice [blood], we stopped at a 7-Eleven convenience store and bought a pound of cheese, a pound of bologna, and a six-pack of beer. That was what was known as a bologna blowout or, in the popular lexicon, a 'baloney' blowout. Since I had gotten juice that night, and was supposed to have been beaten up badly, the guys made me stay in the car and sell the beating I took. They were serious about protecting the business. How would it look if I was beaten within an inch of my life, and then walked into the store 30 minutes later as if nothing had

happened? One of the things George Scott told me was that our job was to prove, at any cost, that what we were doing in the ring was real. "Tony, every person in the audience thinks what we do is fake. Not one person believes this is real. Your job is to convince them that it is."

If Ole worked on my right arm during our match, when I walked back to the dressing room, I sold that arm. When I walked to the car, I sold that arm. I had to sell it all the way out of town. When the fans would ask if the blood was real, I would pull back the bandage and show them the scars.

The first time I actually cut myself was on June 24, 1977, when I wrestled the original Sheik [Ed Farhat] at the Omni. I was a nervous wreck in the dressing room before that match, and kept telling Gene and Ole that I didn't think I could do it. Gene said, "Quit worrying about it, Tony. We'll get the Sheik to take care of it. He'll be happy to cut you, just like Abdullah did last week."

Ole laughed and said, "Yeah, Tony. The Sheik's been doing it for years. It won't be a problem."

Ole and Gene looked at each other and laughed, and then, as if it was just an afterthought, Gene said to Ole, "I remember the time Sheik cut that green kid from ear to ear. You would have thought he was cutting a t-bone steak. That kid bled buckets."

That got my attention. "I think I can do it myself."

"That's a good decision, kid," said Gene. "Trust me. You do not want that guy to cut you."

Gene then showed me how to tape the blade to my finger and manipulate the gimmick when it was time to use it. A lot of the guys carried the blade in their mouth, but I preferred to tape mine to my finger. Ole told me, "When you do that, put tape on all of your fingers. If you only have tape on one finger, the people will look at it. It'll draw their attention." From that day on, whenever I carried a blade, I taped all five fingers.

When I asked the Sheik what the finish was going to be, he told me, "I'll tell you later." When we got into the ring, we still hadn't talked. The match began and I sold for him. I sold, and I sold, and I sold some more. Five minutes into the match, I was lying flat on the mat. When I looked up to see what he was going to do next, I saw him walking up the aisle to the dressing room. I thought, "No!" I was hot in Atlanta, and he had made me look weak and pitiful, without giving me an opportunity to show some offense.

I left the ring, ran down the aisle, and brought him back to the ring. After the match, Gene Anderson said, "You're the luckiest man in the world, Tony. Most of the guys who tried that got cut."

What I didn't realize was that the Sheik had a habit of taping blades to every finger on his hands. When he walked back to the dressing room after his match, he would cut any fan who came within striking distance. I had no idea of the position I had put myself into.

After my match with the Sheik, I learned more about how to get good juice. For the first several weeks, I got a lot of blood, but I was sticking myself with the razor blade, rather than cutting. When I took off the bandage, the scars didn't look like cuts. They looked more like scratches, as if a woman had scratched me with her fingernails. A lot of the guys think you should stick, rather than slice, in order to leave smaller scars. In my opinion, though, the most important thing about a blade job is the aftermath. If wrestling fans saw you the day after you bled, and you only had small scratches on your head, they were likely to believe the old wives' tale about wrestlers using blood capsules. There has to be a visible scar in order for them to believe the blood really did come from your head.

On the other hand, a lot of the guys did horrendous blade jobs on their foreheads. They didn't seem to care. Most of them were so tough and salty that nothing bothered them. They were some of the toughest men I ever met in my

life. Wahoo McDaniel was an animal who had no compunctions about cutting himself. When Tommy Rich would get juice, he would cut from one end of his forehead to the other. One night, I thought he was going to bleed to death in the dressing room.

Captain Lou Albano and Joe Leduc were bad about that, too. Captain Lou cut his jaw so badly one night that he could stick his tongue through the gash. It didn't seem to bother him, though. When Leduc felt like he didn't get enough blood during his match, he would come back to the dressing room and cut some more. He walked into the dressing room one night after his match, with blood literally running from his head. He had clumps of lymph on his chest that looked like Jell-O. When Leduc walked into the bathroom, one of the boys said, "Somebody has to stop Joe." When we peeked into the bathroom, he looked at us and said, "I don't think I got enough juice."

I said, "I think you got enough, brother."

For the most part, black men had to get more juice than white men because it was harder for the audience to see the blood against our darker skin, especially those who were in the upper balcony seats. Ernie Ladd and I didn't have as much of a problem with that because our skin was brown. If you look at pictures of us, you can easily see the juice. Rufus R. Jones, on the other hand, was so black that juice wasn't very noticeable even to people in the front rows at ringside.

One of the things that really endeared me to fans was that I would interact with the kids in the audience—shaking hands, taking pictures, slapping high-fives—and that also was the one thing that really scared me about taping the blade to my finger. To the kids, I was a hero who was a lot like the comic book characters they read about. In their eyes, I had a body like Superman. I was as strong as the Incredible Hulk. And like Captain America, I was the epitome of everything good and honorable in our country. They would run up to me with their little hands outstretched, wanting to

shake my hand and congratulate me. As a babyface, I was expected to shake their hands and embrace them, but that was a scary proposition when I had a blade sticking out from the end of my finger. My memory of the incident is hazy, but I did cut a kid's hand one night when he grabbed my hand before I knew what was happening. That had to be my worst experience with a blade.

Occasionally, the unthinkable happened and one of the wrestlers would drop their blade during their match. When that happened, we would slam our opponent on top of it, or the referee would step on it until he could bend down to pick it up when the attention of the wrestling fans was drawn to another section of the ring. There was no room for an error like that in those days. If we dropped a blade and a fan got their hands on it, that would be our last match there, and possibly, our last match anywhere.

Over the next several years, Abdullah and I had a lot of bloodbaths. There were times when I would

put blood in a balloon, or condom, and hold it in my mouth. I did that with Abdullah a number of times. When he hit me in the throat, I would bite down on the condom, and blood would flow out of my mouth. I also did a gimmick with Alka-Seltzer. When my opponent caught me in a chokehold, or another hold that caused distress to the throat, I would slip the Alka-Seltzer tablet into my mouth. Within seconds, I was foaming at the mouth.

In Ole's book, Inside Out, Ole told the story about Tommy Rich's debut in Georgia. Instead of using the standard formula of the babyface coming in and beating everyone until the heel cheats and screws him, Ole had Abdullah beat Tommy decisively several weeks in a row. Ole did that to test the attitude of the young guys. He wanted to make sure they wouldn't quit after being beaten once or twice. He didn't want to build his whole promotion around one guy, only to see him leave when he was asked to do a job [lose a match]. If a promoter couldn't rely on them, they would be

wasting both time and money to promote them. Ole told me, "You could be the greatest wrestler the people have ever seen. You could have the most impressive physique the people have ever seen. You could have charisma coming out of your ears. But if I can't rely on you, I've got no time for you."

Reliability was the key. When a promoter invested in a young wrestler, they were looking at a two or three-year investment. They wanted to make sure that whoever they put in the top spot was the person who would show up every night and be reliable.

Ole felt that if a guy would go through the humiliation of getting beat on TV every week, and still show up with a good attitude, then he had a good talent. Tommy Rich fit that bill. He did everything the promoters asked him to do, and in return, he was pushed to the moon.

For the next several weeks, there was so much

talk among wrestling fans about my involvement in Tommy's match that Ole decided to put us together as a tag team. The fact that Tony Atlas and Tommy Rich, who was as white as a white person could be, were wrestling as a tag team, generated a lot of talk among wrestling fans. At the time, integration was still relatively new in America, and we became a big topic of discussion. We decided to wrestle as TNT and did an interview that set the territory on fire.

Tony Atlas and Tommy 'Wildfire' Rich.

T for Tony, T for Tommy.

Salt and pepper, black and white, we fight all night.

I was never happy when wrestling promoters wanted me to wrestle in a tag team situation. I did it, but I didn't like it. The one exception to that rule was Tommy Rich. Tommy was my favorite tag team partner. Kevin Sullivan and Mr.

Wrestling #2 were good partners, but Tommy was the only wrestler with whom I really looked forward to teaming. We clicked as a tag team from the first day we were together. The only time I had trouble as a tag team was when the booker put me with another black wrestler. As long as my partner was white, we worked well, but I had problems with every black wrestler I teamed up with.

The ladies were absolutely crazy about Tommy, but he was over with everybody. He was a lot like Dusty Rhodes. He drew the girls, rednecks, and blacks to the arenas. To my shame, he also drew more black stuff to the bedroom than I did.

On the other hand, Ole hated the way Tommy looked. Tommy had a special charisma which drew the ladies to the arenas like cheese draws mice, but his body didn't look very athletic. Ole asked me to take him to the gym and build him up, but even though he didn't like Tommy's physique, Ole continued to push him on top because Tommy sold tickets.

A funny incident took place in 1980. Tommy Rich and I were real hot on TV, so the promoter in Tennessee, Nick Gulas, booked us to wrestle in Chattanooga. When we met him, Nick shook our hands and told us how nice it was for us to make the trip for him. "You boys are real strong on TV here," he said. "The house is sold out."

Nick was so happy with the advance on the house that he took us out for a steak dinner at the Waffle House. At that time, you could buy a steak dinner for around six dollars. Later than night, after we wrestled, Tommy asked me if I got paid. I said, "No, I didn't. Do you think he's just going to send our money to Barnett?"

Tommy had wrestled for Nick for several years before that, and experience told him that Nick might be trying to screw us out of our payoff. A few minutes later, Nick came into the dressing room to say goodnight to everyone. As he picked up his briefcase and began to leave, Tommy said, "Hey, Nick! Are you gonna pay us?"

Nick said, "God damn! I can't believe you two. I just bought you two kids a steak dinner. What more do you want?"

Tommy said, "You give me my money and I'll pay you back your six dollars."

Nick acted like he was insulted that Tommy would have the nerve to ask him for our money. He came through, though. He paid us $150 … in one-dollar bills. On his way home that night, he called Jim Barnett on his cell phone and complained.

Whenever I tell people that one of my closest friends in the business was Tommy Rich, I have to correct myself. We weren't just friends. We were like brothers. I believe if you ever talk to him, he would tell you the same thing.

People were willing to help young wrestlers in those days. One day, before I bought my first car, I rode to a town with Klondike Bill and four other

guys. Picture six big wrestlers in one car! We paid four cents a mile to Klondike, which as the standard rate for "trans" back then.

The only top guys I rode with regularly were Rufus R. Jones, Rocky Johnson, and Tommy Rich, but most of the time, I rode with undercard guys like Don Kernodle, Charlie Cook, and referee Nick Patrick. I liked to be around those guys. Kernodle was a great talent who never really got a shot at the big time, even though he deserved the opportunity.

I never rode with Ole because he would never ride with a babyface. The Crocketts fired Ric Flair and Wahoo McDaniel for riding together. The feud between those two was selling out everywhere, and after making one trip together, they were fired. The next week, they were re-hired. The office did it simply to send the message that no matter who you were, exposing the business in such a way would not be tolerated. In those days, if I was involved in a program with Mr.

Saito, and I walked into a restaurant where he was eating, I would immediately turn around and go to another restaurant. We wouldn't even be caught staying in the same hotel.

I rode with Charlie Cook a lot during my first year. Charlie bought me a book and told me to list every expense I incurred: hotel, food, and gasoline. I kept a good list of what I spent for my first several years in the business, but later, when I went to the WWF, I didn't keep track of anything.

For the most part, the top guys rode with the top guys. Tommy and I didn't like that. We treated everybody the same. In our eyes, when it came to the road, there weren't any top guys. When guys like Charlie Cook and Don Kernodle rode with us, we paid for everything, just like Dick Murdoch did for me early in my career during the few times I made trips with him. The underneath guys weren't making very much money, so Tommy and I took care of them. We paid for their rooms, their food, the gas, and the tolls. Tommy and I would also

give money to the underneath guys when they were broke. One of the guys came up to me one day and said, "Tony, can you loan me 300 bucks?"

I reached into my pocket and gave it to him. "Consider it a gift." I said. "I'm making good money now."

I had much more money than I needed, and I had a soft spot in my heart for the guys who were struggling. Many of them were making $400 a week, while I was making $2,500.

I think it's interesting to note that if you look back at the results from shows in the '60s and '70s, the main event wrestlers were generally 30 years old and older. Wahoo McDaniel, Blackjack Mulligan, Johnny Weaver, Johnny Valentine, and George Becker weren't young guys. I remember one night when Butcher Vachon told me he was going to celebrate by getting drunk that night, and asked if I would like to go with him. I asked him, "What are you celebrating?"

He was celebrating his 50th birthday! And he was still wrestling.

The promoters just didn't invest much in the younger guys in those days. You had to pay your dues. You had to earn that spot.

Ric Flair was one of the first young men to reach superstardom, and he got there by accident. From 1973 through 1975, Johnny Valentine was the man in Charlotte. He was the man. When Johnny was crippled in a plane crash on October 4, 1975, Flair eased into Valentine's spot. I'm sure Flair's talent would have eventually pushed him to the top of his craft, but it was sheer luck, not to discount Valentine's misfortune, that Flair became one of the first really young wrestlers to work in the main event and headline a territory.

Flair also got a lot of rub when he was promoted as Gene and Ole Anderson's "cousin." Early in his career, Ole got a big push in much the same way. Ole was billed as the younger brother of

Gene and Lars Anderson, and his gift of gab was what garnered most of the heat for the Andersons. Lars and Gene took care of business in the ring, but the people came to the arenas because Ole talked them there with his promos. Gene didn't talk. He just couldn't talk. Giving credit where it's due, Lars was a good interview, but Ole was much, much better. Eventually, the fans began to look at Ole as the leader of the Anderson clan.

Trust and respect was very important to old-school wrestlers. In other words, if I set my wrestling bag down and walked out of the dressing room, I didn't want to worry about somebody messing with it. A lot of the guys kept valuables in their bags. Everybody carried cash, too. Very few people carried credit cards in those days, and the average wrestler had anywhere from $500 to $1,000 in their wallet. Ric Flair would leave his $5,000 Rolex watch lying on the bench.

Respect took place in the ring, too. Half of the guys who let me win my matches could have

beaten me easily if they had wanted. Take Les Thornton, for example. He was a shooter from way back. There is no way in the world I could have whipped Les Thornton, even if I wanted to, but he would go out in front of thousands of people and lie down for me. That was respect.

Seniority was important, too. If I was riding in a car with somebody, and we stopped to pick up Mr. Wrestling #2, I would automatically get out of the front passenger seat and sit in the back. I didn't have to be told to do that. "Two" had seniority.

Even then, we had a few jerks in every territory who didn't respect the old-timers, although it wasn't like today, where a majority of the guys don't show respect for the guys who paved the way for them. Back then, we knew who the jerks were. When somebody broke you into the business, it was like you were being adopted into our family, so we had to do our best to get along with each other. If you and I had a disagreement, the worst thing I could do was to chew you out in

front of the boys. If I had a disagreement with you and I wanted to keep the respect of the rest of the boys, I would pull you to the side and invite you to go somewhere where we could discuss our disagreement in private.

After Ric Flair broke the age barrier, promoters began taking a closer look at the younger wrestlers. Terry Gordy broke into the business when he was just 16 years old. Tommy Rich and the Von Erichs were teenagers when they began wrestling. By 1976, if you were 25 years old, the promoters wouldn't even look at you. They wouldn't think about breaking you into the business if you were in your mid-twenties. I asked Ole, "How old were you when you started in the business."

He said, "I got a late start in the business. I was 24."

That was considered late. Most wrestlers began wrestling when they were in their early

twenties. Ole was lucky to get in at his age, but he was big, strong, and had great promo skills. Otherwise, they might have passed him up.

Georgia was the easiest territory to work for, and I made good money there. During the years I wrestled in Georgia, I averaged between $50,000 and $100,000 a year. In 1977, Rufus R. Jones averaged $2,200 a week. Jim Barnett, the primary owner of the Atlanta territory, treated me well. He would only pay $50 for TV, but we would get $500 payoffs when we wrestled in the Omni. Payoffs in Columbus and Augusta averaged $200, and with spot shows filling out the rest of the week, we could pick up another $200 or more. We could easily make $1,200 a week or more, which was good money considering we could live on less than $500 a week. Apartment rent was reasonable at about $200 a month, but most of the guys stayed at the Falcon's Rest in Hapeville for $50 a week. Falcon's Rest was a long block of apartments that looked like they had been around since the 1920s. Almost every

wrestler who worked the Atlanta territory stayed there at one time or another.

After my big angle with Tommy Rich and Abdullah, I was making between $1,500 and $2,000 a week. At $2,500 a week, Tommy Rich and Dick Slater were making more money than me, but I had nothing to complain about, even though we were all in the same relative position. Before getting into the business, I had been making $60 a week, and after the lesson I had been taught by George Scott, when he sent me to Hell, I wasn't about to complain.

On the other hand, Thunderbolt Patterson did nothing but complain, and he was being paid the same money as Rich and Slater. To add insult to injury, even though he was making the same money, he refused to work the small towns. He worked four times a week: Atlanta, Augusta, Columbus, and Saturday morning TV. He only worked on the Sunday show when they forced him. And yet, he was making the same money as guys who were

working five and six days a week.

Occasionally, when one of the boys wanted to buy a new car, they would let the office know. The office would buy the car, and then book a tournament with the eventual winner to get the car. Of course, the winner was the guy who wanted to buy the car. The office would make a show out of presenting the car to him and he would later pay them back. When they held a tournament for a Cadillac in Atlanta, Thunderbolt "won" the car, but he never reimbursed the office. Ole, who had been opposed to the idea in the first place, told Jim Barnett, "I told you Tony Atlas wanted to buy a new Cadillac, and that you should have given it to him! At least then, we would have gotten our money back."

I never saw Thunderbolt do a job [lose a match], either. I never minded doing a job. Whenever I did, Ole put me in an angle that put me over strong. Ole was all about money. If he felt the situation called for it, and he could draw money by

doing it, he would get into the ring and put me over himself. He didn't care whether or not he lost. He was all business. He put me over many times. A lot of the guys didn't like to put other guys over, but I didn't have much of a problem when it came to that. The guys would go to the office and request to work with me, even knowing they'd have to put me over, because they knew I drew money. They also wanted to work with me because I would sell for them. Very few of the top guys would sell. In fact, most of the guys thought that because of the way I looked, I was going to kick the hell out of them when they wrestled me for the first time. They were shocked when I went out and sold big-time for them.

The best thing about working the Atlanta territory was we were home almost every night. Augusta, at 140 miles, was one of the longest trips. Savannah, the longest trip in the territory, was 250 miles, but I only wrestled there a few times a year.

When it came to making your bookings, Ole

didn’t accept excuses. If you weren’t dead, you were expected to be at the arena by the appointed time. If you were dead, he would make a concession for you being late.

One night, while wrestling the Freebirds in Rome, Georgia, I dislocated my knee as I pressed Michael Hayes over my head. Back in the dressing room, Bill Dromo slapped it back into place, but it swelled up to the size of a small watermelon. My knee was 20 inches around. The guys were laughing and telling me, "You never had big legs, Tony, but you do now!"

The next morning, the phone rang at eight o’clock. It was Ole. "What a nice guy Ole is, calling to see how I’m doing," I thought.

"Don’t be late for the show tonight," he said. That was followed by a "click" as he hung up the phone.

My wife helped me get dressed. "You can’t go to

the show like this!" she said.

"I got to go. I won't have a job if I don't go."

She didn't say anything. She just picked up our baby and walked out.

When I got to the building, I couldn't walk. Two of the undercard guys carried both me and my bag into the building. Gene Anderson and a doctor were standing in the dressing room when they carried me in. If you picture the Dr. Emmett Brown character from the movie Back to the Future, you will have a good idea of what the doctor looked like. He could have been his twin brother. He held a syringe and was squirting drops of liquid from a long needle. I thought, "Where in the hell did this guy come from?"

I didn't know what they were going to do, but before I could give it too much thought, Gene growled, "Come here and grab my hand."

The doctor made me feel a lot better when he

consoled me by saying, "Kid, this is gonna hurt a little bit."

Gene said, "The doctor's gonna give you a shot of cortisone. Just squeeze my hand and think about something else."

Talk about pain … I had never felt that much pain in my life. I came close to wetting my pants. Gene later told me that I squeezed his hand so hard that he thought I was going to break bones. The cortisone made my knee hurt worse than it did originally. They completed the task by wrapping an icepack and bandage around it. Ole came in while they were finishing up. "You're spending too much time with him. He's not a baby. He'll live. Send him to the ring!"

I wrestled Harley Race for a solid 60 minutes that night, and from that day on, the knee never gave me any trouble. Every three or four years, it might lock up, but for the most part, it hasn't caused me any problems.

Part of the reason Ole insisted I go was that the building was completely sold out that night. In those days, the promoters couldn't just substitute one wrestler for another, especially one that was in the main event. On the rare occasion when that happened, they had to offer refunds to everybody, and at the time, the Omni was the biggest wrestling show in the state of Georgia. That was the wrestling business in those days. We worked around our injuries. If we were hurt badly enough we couldn't make it to the ring, we were still expected to show up and let the people see us. Short of death, we had to make the town. After the matches that night, a fan named Fred Chaney, a black kid I used to hang with, told me, "Tony, there were enough people standing outside the Omni to sell the building again."

In the spring of 1978, I was back in the Charlotte territory, but I made frequent trips back to Atlanta. On May 9, 1978, during my first TV appearance after my return, I worked with the Missouri Mauler in Raleigh. George Scott put me with Mauler

because he knew Mauler could get me over. The Mauler and I were good friends. He and his brother, Jody Hamilton, helped me a lot when I got started in the business. George told me, "I heard a lot of good things about your run in Atlanta. Do all the stuff that got you hot there."

I said, "Okay," and went to the ring. The first thing I did was make a "Thunderbolt Patterson comeback." I did all the things Thunderbolt did. What I didn't know was that Mauler hated Thunderbolt Patterson. He straightened up and looked at me, with fire in his eyes, as if he was thinking, "What the heck?" He thought I was mocking him.

Mauler stood in front of me and said, "Do whatever you want, but I won't sell that Thunderbolt shit!"

I don't have to tell you that the match stunk. By the time the match was over, I was really angry because I had wanted to show George Scott what I

had learned. When I walked into the dressing room, I punched the door. That was a bad mistake! It was a steel door. Wahoo set my hand in the dressing room. When I was leaving for the hospital, David Crockett said, "Don't let them put a cast on your hand. You have to wrestle Baron von Raschke tomorrow for the TV title."

As I was instructed, I told the doctor I didn't want a cast, but I had broken bones in my hand, so they insisted on it. When I went back to the office, the Crocketts gave me a royal chewing out. "We told you not to do that!"

They decided to do an angle using the cast as a gimmick, and I wrestled Baron von Raschke for 30 minutes on TV with my broken hand in a cast. Later, when I won the Mid-Atlantic heavyweight title, I hit Ken Patera with the cast. I didn't miss one day of work. At the time, I didn't even think about it. It was just something expected of us, and something we did without giving it any thought.

At that stage in my career, I didn't hang out with the top guys as much as I had before. When I was just learning the business, I spent a lot of time with the older guys, but once I became more independent and sure of myself, I began to hang out with the under-card guys. I remember one time in Georgia after I had just bought a brand-new Lincoln Continental. Ric Flair came in to work for a few weeks and asked if he could catch a ride to a town with me. I said, "Sure," but when he found out I had an underneath guy with me, he said he didn't want to ride with me. When I asked him why, he said, "Those guys are looking to take my spot. You've already got your position, so you're not really a threat to me."

There were a lot of cliques in the business, and certain guys seemed to gravitate to each other. At times, however, guys would hang out with a certain person just because there wasn't anybody else to be with. Dick Murdoch never hung around me unless it was absolutely necessary, but when he did, he treated me like a man.

The only time off we had was10 days before Christmas. On Christmas day, we worked twice: a matinee in the afternoon and an evening show. That was hard on families because they had to have their Christmas dinner in the morning. If your wife had a baby, she better have family to help her. That was one of the reasons why promoters didn't want the boys to get married. They wanted the boys to put the business before everything else.

I loved wrestling Harley Race. I consider Harley and Dory Funk, Jr. to be the best wrestlers because they could work any style. Dory Dixon, Skip Young, and Mil Mascaras were also great wrestlers, but they could only work a certain style. If you worked their style, you would have a fantastic match. However, when you work with Harley, he works your style. Harley could work a high spot match one night and go to the ground the next. I've been privileged to work with a lot of great wrestlers, but of them all, Harley was probably one of the best I ever worked with.

The first time I met Dory Funk, we wrestled on TV. He said, "Kid, how long have you been in the business?"

I said, "Two weeks."

He said, "Okay, I'll tell you what we're gonna do. When the match starts, grab my wrist and hold onto it. Don't let it go." He then turned around and walked away. That was it. I was sitting there thinking, "What? I'm supposed to hold onto his wrist for fifteen minutes?"

I did exactly as Dory asked and held onto his wrist. He put himself in and out of holds for the entire match. When I came out of the ring, people told me, "You almost beat him." I had no idea what I had even done … other than hold onto Dory's wrist. He did my job and his. I was absolutely amazed. He had a match all by himself.

On August 17, 1979, I wrestled Harley in the Omni for the NWA world heavyweight title. Ole

wanted me to wrestle in my posing trunks because they would show off my build more than the standard wrestling trunks. Harley said, "Is this a wrestling match or a bodybuilding contest? You look like you're going to pose, kid. You look naked."

All throughout the match, Harley kept making references to my trunks. He really seemed to be bothered by them. Finally, when I grabbed Harley in a headlock, he said, "Reverse, throw me to the ropes, and give me a backdrop."

I did exactly as I was told. I threw him into the ropes and bent down for the backdrop. As Harley went over, he pulled my trunks down to my ankles. I found myself standing in front of a sold-out Omni, with my trunks on the mat around my ankles … and no underwear underneath. I was humiliated. I pulled up my trunks and went right back to working, but I had a tough time keeping a straight face. We both had to stifle our laughter. I told Harley, "I'm a little hot at you for doing

that. That was embarrassing." Harley whispered, "I just wanted the people to see the dark side of the moon," and he laughed harder.

When we got back to the dressing room, I said to Ole, "Did you see what Harley did to me?"

With a straight face, Ole said, "I'm just glad you've got a big one or you would have killed the black gimmick."

That was the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to me in my whole life, and all Ole cared about was the possibility of killing the "black gimmick." For the next several weeks, I heard one joke after another from the guys in the dressing room.

Harley will tell you this himself. When he was the world champion, he told the promoters, "Put the belt on Atlas."

On March 4, 1980, Jim Barnett booked me out to Paul Boesch in Houston. Once again, I wrestled

Harley for the title and the Coliseum was sold out. I don't know if it was true or not, but Boesch said it was the biggest house he ever had in his whole career. After I bench pressed 550 pounds in the ring three times, Harley and I wrestled non-stop to a one-hour draw.

The referee for our match was Lou Thesz, the former NWA world heavyweight champion. Lou was the perfect gentleman, and I mean "gentleman" in every sense of the word. There was something about him that made people feel good about the wrestling business. He had respect for himself, the boys, and the fans. He was (and is) a legend, and yet, whether you were a top guy like Hulk Hogan or a curtain jerker, Lou showed you the same respect. In my opinion, he was the ideal person to represent the wrestling business as the world champion. He was also a guy you would want on your side when you found yourself in a fight with the odds stacked against you.

Paul Boesch was an honest man. He gave me the

same payoff he gave Harley. Harley got mad about it because he was the world champion. In his opinion, the world champion should always get more money than the challenger. Harley went to Boesch and said, "Look, I'm the champion. Tony Atlas shouldn't be gettin' the same money I get."

Boesch told him, "If you weren't wrestling Tony Atlas, you wouldn't have made that big payday. It was really Tony Atlas the people paid to see, not you. They wanted to see him win that belt."

Harley really got mad, so he called Barnett. Barnett called Paul Boesch and told him, "Don't pay Tony that much money. You're going to mess him up. From now on, send the money here to me and I'll pay Tony."

Paul Boesch said, "No, I'm not gonna do that. If Tony Atlas wrestles main event, he's going to get the same money that everybody else gets, and I'm not giving his money to anybody but him."

Paul Boesch did something special for me before he died. When Vince McMahon, Jr. took over Houston, they planned to hold a retirement show dedicated to Paul Boesch on August 28, 1987. Paul told Vince, "One of my requests is that when you do my tribute show, I want Tony Atlas on the card." According to Paul Boesch, I drew more money for him than any wrestler he ever had. He said I drew his biggest houses when I was on the card.

During a match in the Omni on November 27, 1980, with Harley's NWA world heavyweight title at stake, we did a finish in the Omni where I pinned Harley—one, two, three—but after the referee had counted to three, Harley put his foot on the bottom rope. When the referee looked up and saw that, he was supposed to order the match to continue. When I stood up, assuming I had won the match, Harley was supposed to roll me up into a small package and pin me. However, before he could do that, just about every fan in the building was in the ring. They all thought the world title

had changed hands. There were so many people in the ring that it collapsed from the weight. Thinking I had won the title, they picked me up and carried me back to the dressing room.

Harley said that was the first time he remembered walking back from the ring and nobody noticing him. He said he felt like he was invisible, or not even in the building. He went back and told Ole Anderson, "Ole, that boy is on fire. Don't let him sit on the shelf. I'm going to Japan for awhile. Let me drop this belt to him. I'll take it back when I get back."

Ole didn't think I was ready for the title. He was afraid to go down that road.

I loved to wrestle Harley, but he did things to me in the ring that really hurt. For instance, if I would hold him in a headlock, he would grind his beard into my side, down around my love handles where the skin was really sensitive. It felt like he was rubbing the skin from my side. That really hurt, but

all I could do was grit my teeth. With 10,000 people watching, there was no way I could just let go. Not only that, but Harley was the heel, so he was leading the match, and I couldn't let go until he told me to do so. At other times, Harley would put his face on my chest, take my nipple in his mouth, and grind it between his teeth. Again, I couldn't let go and I couldn't sell it. Harley would say, "If I bite off your nipple, you can't win those bodybuilding contests."

"No, Mister Race. I guess I couldn't."

By the time I left the ring, my nipples had swelled up to almost twice their normal size.

In March 1980, when Harley was the world champion, he had a match against Mr. Wrestling #2. The finish was confusing, so on the TV program the following day, they proclaimed Two as the Champion of Champions and presented him with a trophy. At the time, I was involved in a tag team program with Kevin Sullivan as my partner

against Ivan Koloff and Alexis Smirnoff. Without any doubt, Tommy Rich was the most popular wrestler in the territory and he got the most fan mail, but for some reason, Watts gave the trophy to Mr. Wrestling #2 [Two]. As history shows, the title never amounted to anything, and with good reason. At the time, Tommy Rich was the hottest babyface single in the promotion. I don't mean to take anything away from Two, but to award the trophy to him was ludicrous. The fans saw right through it.

That was a big mistake. Unfortunately, a lot of the promoters in those days did what they wanted to do, and not necessarily what was the best for business. Many of the old-time promoters felt like they needed to work the people, and not let the people work them. In most cases, that's the way things should have been, but in that particular case, Watts had asked the people for their opinion. When he failed to listen to their opinion, the people refused to look at the championship as being important. The one thing Bill didn't

understand was, if you dangle a carrot in front of a mule, he'll pull your carriage, but if the mule realizes he won't ever get the carrot, he won't pull the carriage. That was one time when Bill should have given the carrot to the mule.

That was the main difference between Ole Anderson and Bill Watts. Ole and Bill both got the most mileage they could out of their talent, but Ole knew when to move on. Bill didn't know when to move on. For many years, the Atlanta office put their faith in the drawing power of Mr. Wrestling #2, who was unquestionably one of the hottest babyfaces ever to wrestle in the Atlanta territory. When Thunderbolt Patterson got back into the business, Ole realized it was his turn, so he gave him the big push and featured Two less and less. Two was still over, but Thunderbolt was over more. When Thunderbolt became a problem and his drawing power began to wane, it was my turn. When my turn was over, they concentrated on featuring Tommy Rich. And while all of those people were getting their turn, Two remained in

line and was consistently given a good, albeit lesser, push. By the time the title was created, Two's day was just about over, and yet, Watts wanted to keep him in the top spot. They had gone back to the well too many times, though, and Watts should have listened to what the people wanted. After all, they were the ones who bought tickets (or, in this case, didn't buy tickets).

However, a very positive result came out of that title. When the weekly wrestling show was on WTBS, it got high ratings and a huge numbers of viewers from all over the country. Surprisingly enough, the wrestling office received the least amount of letters from Atlanta, Georgia, while the biggest percentage of fan mail came from West Virginia and Ohio. Jim Barnett picked up on the fact that there was a huge fan base in those states and he came up with the idea of running shows there. He worked out a deal with the Sheik [Ed Farhat], who promoted the Ohio area, to book shows in his territory.

In 1980, when I was the Georgia heavyweight champion, Freddie Miller, who was Gordon Solie's co-host on the Georgia Championship Wrestling TV show, called me one afternoon. He said, "Muhammad Ali is going to speak at a hotel in Atlanta. I'd like you to meet him." When Ali finished his speech, Freddie took me to meet him. He said, "This is our champion here in Georgia."

Ali looked at me and said, "When I first saw that big afro, I thought you were George Foreman. Show me how strong you are."

When we locked up, he put his hand on my bicep. "What in the world do you have under this coat?" When he looked at me, I had a tear in my eye. I couldn't believe I was participating in a mock tussle with Muhammad Ali, the man I considered to be the greatest boxing champion ever. He raised my arm in the sky and then spent some time talking to me. Ali was one of the most famous men in the history of sports, and yet, he

made me feel like I was important. He was so genuine. Every word that came out of his mouth was a compliment, and he treated me like I was a superstar.

Tommy Rich had a bad habit of turning all the way around in the driver's seat and talking to the passengers in the back seat. He would drive 80 mph and turn around to talk to me. He had never wrecked, so we got somewhat used to it, but for a long time, it scared the hell out of me. One night, Johnny Rich, Nick Patrick, and I were coming back from Columbus, Ohio with Tommy. Tommy was driving and I was sitting behind him, sound asleep. As usual, Tommy turned to say something to Nick Patrick. When he turned back around, he screamed, "Holy shit!" When I woke up, I was looking at an upside-down view of the earth. That's all I remember. Later, I was told what happened after that.

Ole Anderson and the Iron Sheik had been following us. The Sheik jumped out of the car and

said, "Ole, we have to help them!"

Ole said, "No. You can't go help them. They're babyfaces."

That's how protective they were of the business. It was more important to protect the business than to save somebody's life. If I had been on fire, and the Sheik had a glass of water in his hand, Ole might have said, "Let him burn. He's a babyface." That's a bit of an exaggeration because Ole never would have let things get that far, but it's a good example of how important it was to protect the business.

The Sheik ran over to the car, anyway. The door on my side of the car was ajar, but it wouldn't open because it was badly damaged. The Sheik grabbed the door and actually bent it back on the hinges. I was in a seated position, and the roof had jammed my neck down. He freed me and pulled me out to safety. When I woke up, I was in the hospital. The nurse brought me a stack of phone

messages. She said, "Your neck is broken and you will be here for awhile. Everybody is very concerned about you. Our phones are ringing off the hook!"

I was getting a lot of calls from friends, but the most persistent caller was … guess who?

That's right.

Ole!

He told me he had made arrangements for the hospital to release me, and as soon as I was discharged, I was to report to the TV studio. I left the hospital with a halo supporting my head, but when I got to the studio, Ole removed it because he wanted to film an angle between me and Buzz Sawyer. On the TV set, he had me sit at a table with my hand on my chin to hold my neck in place. He then told Buzz to break a 2x4 board over my head, so when the fans saw me wearing the halo, they would think Buzz was responsible.

I can't say the angle went off without a hitch. Buzz had to hit me twice to break the 2x4. I never felt the second one. Of course, that was because the first blow put me out like a light. They reinstalled the halo, but I removed it a short time after that and replaced it with a neck brace.

When I tell that story to friends, they either say I was crazy to do that, or they think I'm lying, but at the time, the only thing I was concerned about was getting back into the ring. My thoughts were like those of every other wrestler in the business at the time. I had a one-track mind. One of the things wrestlers had in common with each other was that we had one-track minds. If I was laid up with an injury, the only thing I thought about was that the other guys were getting laid, having fun, eating great meals, and getting the attention I should be getting. If I wasn't able to appear on TV, somebody else would be in my spot, and the longer I stayed in the hospital, the tougher it would be to reclaim my position. I couldn't wait to get back in front of the cameras and into the ring. When Ole

told me Buzz was going to hit me over the head with the 2x4, I knew I was going to make some money as soon as I recovered. Injury or no injury, I couldn't wait to do the angle.

Chapter 9
If the Walls Could Talk

I had so much sex in Atlanta. It was every night, and most of the time, it was with a different woman. It was an everyday (and night) occurrence to see women go from one hotel room to another. It gave new meaning to the words "room service."

George Scott gave me some advice when I was breaking into the business. When I told him I had a girlfriend (my first), George said, "Why do you want a girlfriend? Screw them all! That will keep them coming back to the matches." It was as if part of our job was to screw as many girls as we

could. Every wrestler in the business in those days heard that same speech. The girls didn't come to the matches to watch the show. They bought tickets to the show, but their purpose for being there was to be with a wrestler. There were thousands of those girls. I'm not exaggerating. In Georgia during my heyday, a large majority of the fans were black. Black wrestlers didn't mess with white girls. That was taboo. I was the only black wrestler in the territory, and with the majority of the fans being black … well, you can draw your own conclusion. Many times, I was with two or three different girls a day. There were times when I would be with the same girls, but most of the time, I was plowing new ground every day.

The boys used to make fun of guys who would fall in love with one of the rats because they had been with all the wrestlers. My second wife had been Jimmy Snuka's girl before me. Two of us had sex with her on the same night and I ended up marrying her. The boys made fun of me for that. When I went out of town, the girl I was

screwing one night was screwing someone else the following night.

As long as you were a wrestler, you had it made. The girls would seek you out. It didn't matter if you were fat, skinny, ugly, or old. If you were a wrestler, they would jump at any opportunity to go to bed with you. Before I became a wrestler, all I could get was a 38-year-old woman with false teeth and five kids. And yet, when I became a wrestler, I had my pick. If a group of girls was standing around waiting when I came out of an arena, I could point to one and say, "You. Get in the car." She would hop right in. Again, as long as you were a wrestler ... that's all it took.

I could tell sex stories that took place in every arena in the country. We would have sex outside behind the arenas, in the cars, in the dressing room, in the shower, and in the toilet stalls. It wasn't unusual to walk into the dressing room and find a girl servicing one of the boys in the

bathroom. That was an every-night occurrence. What was unusual was for nobody to get a blowjob on any particular night.

The word spread quickly when a new girl came to the hotel to see a wrestler and all the boys would all go to that room. I walked into hotel rooms almost every night to see a girl lying on the bed, buck naked. When I tell people stories like that, they say, "Oh, that isn't true. You're exaggerating." Trust me. Every word of what I say is true.

At night, Tommy Rich would take a girl to his room. A few minutes later, there would be a knock on his door. When he opened it, the boys would all be standing there with beers in their hands. When Tommy was finished, they would each take their turn. A lot of the older guys couldn't get laid any other way. They would hang out with the young wrestlers in order to get laid. They would wait for the young wrestlers to get the girls undressed and in a sexual mood, then

they would show up to take over.

If a young wrestler didn't let all the boys do his women, he was labeled "a fence builder." A fence builder is a guy who would take the arena rats [groupies] for himself and not share. I wasn't a fence builder. When Tommy Rich and I were together, if I had a girl, he had a girl. He did the same for me.

One of Tommy's girlfriends told me her father would disown her if he discovered she had been with a black man. Tommy said, "He's not a black man. He's Tony Atlas. He's my brother!" She told Tommy she liked me, but she wouldn't go to bed with me because she didn't believe in mixing. She wasn't racist. I understood her belief because I rode with Dick Murdoch, who helped me understand other people's beliefs. Tommy told her, "Well, if you don't believe in mixing, then get out."

He actually told her to leave the room because

she wouldn't have sex with me. I tried to talk him out of it, but he was adamant. "If she's too good to be with my brother, then she's too good to be with me."

That's how we were.

Most of the girls the guys dated or married had been with most of the other guys, anyway. Wrestlers were the freakiest guys on earth. The old-timers would say, "Never bring your wife to the show because one of the boys will get her." That's why the guys never brought their wives to the matches. The other guys would go after them. Randy Savage's father, Angelo Poffo, had been around the business for more than 30 years, so he knew about the pressures and temptations put on wives by his fellow wrestlers. He told the stories to Randy, who became very protective of his wife, Elizabeth, even to a point where he would lock her in the dressing room while he was wrestling. There just weren't any boundaries, and the promoters were as

bad as the boys when it came to crossing those lines. There are many stories of promoters sending certain wrestlers on long, overnight trips in order to have time to chase after their wives.

I have to mention Tito Santana and Nikolai Volkoff. Tito was the only wrestler I knew who wouldn't hang out with the boys. That's why Tito is still married today. He honored his wedding vows and didn't mess around with other women. The same goes for Nicolai. Not only did he refuse to cheat on his wife, but he got mad when the Iron Sheik would do it.

Some of the girls would even spend their money on us. Many times, a girl would pick me up at the airport and say, "You can stay with us, Tony." When I got to the room, they would have a bathtub filled with ice and beer, and a table with cold cuts and fruit. When the girl(s) took me to the arena that night, I would tell the guys, "Hey, there's a party in my room tonight if you want to come by." I shared both the food and the girls.

There was one lady who used to bring her daughter to the matches. They would both do the boys. During one of my days off, she had a room about two doors down from mine at the Passport Inn. I noticed she had some nice tennis shoes, so I invited her to come to the room and walk on me. Not only did Mom walk on me, but her daughter walked on me, as well. I didn't have sex with the daughter, but I spent some time in the bed with the mother while her daughter watched. That wasn't unusual. There were quite a few mother-daughter tag teams in the various towns. That was the first time I fooled with a white woman. I never told anyone about it because she asked me not to tell. She said she always wanted to be with a black man, but was afraid of what the other boys might say.

Other girls would claim they were pregnant. They would say they were going to get an abortion, so they needed some money. I once gave a girl $500. When I told the boys in the dressing room about it, they began laughing. I said,

"Why are you laughing?"

They said, "She gets all the new guys with that." I soon learned that shaking the boys down for "abortion money" was a common scam by some of the girls.

One of the black wrestlers in Georgia was a preliminary wrestler in the ring, but in the bedroom, he was a main eventer. Not only that, but he had the biggest you-know-what and he never blew up. He could really go. One night, he brought a girl into our room. I was lying in the other bed listening to them get it on. The next thing I knew, I heard him snoring. I looked over and saw him sleeping on top of her! An hour later, he woke me up when he went at it again. When I woke up early in the morning, he was humping her again. For all I knew, he might have been going all night. I got up, got dressed, and told him I was going to the gym. He didn't miss a beat. Without even a pause in what he was doing, he turned his head and said, "Have a good workout, brother!"

If the walls of Falcon's Rest could talk, a lot of the guys would be in a peck of trouble. If you couldn't get laid in Georgia, you couldn't get laid. I got laid every night. That might sound like a lie, but it isn't. One night, I gave Pez Whatley a ride to the City Auditorium in Atlanta. He had been booked out of Knoxville and was in Georgia for a week. After the match, I was signing autographs, so I gave Pez the keys to my brand-new Lincoln Continental. Pez came back a minute or so later and said, "Where'd you park?"

"Over there," I said, pointing in the direction of where I had parked the car.

"There's no car there."

"My car has to be there."

"No. There's just a crowd of people."

As I walked towards the section of the parking lot where I remembered parking my car, I saw a huge group of people standing around. Sure enough, my

car was behind them. Pez used to tell people that four rows of women stood around my car. Four rows was a bit of an exaggeration, but there were at least 20 women waiting for me, and every one of them wanted to go with me to Falcon's Rest. I don't tell that story in order to brag because most of the guys had women throwing themselves at them. I tell the story to let people know what it was like to be a wrestler in those days.

I am so thankful that the herpes and AIDs epidemic hadn't yet taken hold of our society, and I was so lucky I didn't contract one of the other sexually transmitted diseases that were common at the time. When we were staying at the Passport Inn in Atlanta, a bunch of us had sex with one particular girl. She did all the boys all the time. If you were a wrestler, her legs flew wide open. The guys called one day and told me she had given the names of all the people she had been with during the past month to the health department. I was one of them. In cases like that, the health board automatically asks you to come down to be

tested. The report showed I didn't have an STD. When I asked my doctor why others got it and I didn't, he said my immune system was too strong for it to take hold.

One night, I had another one of the guys with me. As we reached my car, he said, "I wouldn't mind gettin' in on some of that action."

I told him to look around and pick out a couple of the girls that caught his eye. When he told me which ones he wanted, I pointed my finger and said, "You, you, and you. Get in."

With no hesitation whatsoever, the three girls climbed into the back seat and we all went to party at Falcon's Rest. It was that easy.

But Junkyard Dog was the Master. He took things one step further by making women pay him for sex. He charged them $100. He used to tell me, "We're the superstars, not them. If they want us, make 'em pay!"

They had to give him money or bring him something else, but they couldn't be with him if they didn't bring some form of payment. One night, we were both stone broke, and he wanted some drugs. He told me, "That shouldn't be a problem. I have some girls coming over tonight."

Later that night, a girl came to our room and Dog had sex with her. As she was walking out, he looked at me and said, "Look on the desk." I saw a $100 bill lying there. He said, "In fifteen minutes, I have another one coming over." Dog had three girls that night and he made $300, of which he gave me $100.

While Dog was with the third girl, we ordered from room service. A short time later, somebody knocked on the door and Dog answered it, thinking it was room service. Instead, it was one of the wrestlers. When he saw the girl lying naked on the bed, he was in the room and out of his clothes before Dog had time to close the door. Dog just laughed and screamed, "Tear it up,

George!" (There were a lot of wrestlers named George, so that should get the rumor mills going). Before Dog could sit down to eat his food, George was finished. He then proceeded to roll over and go to sleep. George definitely won the prize for the quickest I had ever seen in my life.

The boys used to make fun of me and one other wrestler (who will remain nameless) because we would marry the arena rats [groupies]. The girls could do 19 wrestlers in a month, and even though we knew we were numbers 20 and 21, we would fall in love with them. Of my four marriages (Joyce, Lori, Lisa and Monika), only my first and last (current) wives weren't rats. I met my second and third wives at the matches.

The problem with my first wife, Joyce, was she married me on the rebound. She talked so much about her ex-boyfriend that I knew more about him than I knew about her. It was pathetic. They never married and they weren't together more than eight months. When she told him she was pregnant with

twins, he beat her up and she had a miscarriage. I met her at the matches shortly after that. Joyce's friend had a crush on me, but I fell for Joyce. We began dating in Georgia in June 1977 shortly after I quit wrestling as the Black Atlas. We got married a year later when Joyce gave birth to our daughter, Nikki. Two years later, when Joyce served me with the divorce papers, I didn't want to accept it. I told her, "We have a kid now, so let's try to work it out." She didn't want to hear it.

I met Lori shortly after my divorce was finalized. Lori and I were together for four years in what could best be called a common-law marriage, but since I was on the road so much, we spent less than 18 months of that time living in the same house. For the first year, she traveled with me, but then she went back to Los Angeles.

During the time when I was working for Georgia Championship Wrestling, I was one of the few wrestlers who worked primarily in one territory, but made trips, or what we called "shots," to other

territories. The only two other wrestlers who did that on a regular basis were Dusty Rhodes and the world champion. When Brody walked into the dressing room one day, I said, "Hey, Bruiser. How're you doin'?"

He said, "Not as good as you, kid. You're all over the place. Everywhere I go, I hear the name Tony Atlas."

Since 1977, I had been drawing big houses everywhere they put me. On June 9, 1979, I went to Jacksonville to team with Dusty Rhodes against Don Muraco and King Curtis. The last time I saw King Curtis, I was in Hawaii. He told me, "Tony, I'll never forget the night we wrestled in Jacksonville. People were hanging from the rafters to see you, not Dusty Rhodes, and Dusty didn't like that. He never drew a house like that in Jacksonville. Have you ever wondered why you were never invited back?"

That's the story as King Curtis tells it, and if you

ask him, he'll swear it's true. I can't say I agree with him, though. Nobody drew like Dusty. He was the king when it came to drawing houses, but I was right up there with people like Wahoo McDaniel.

The promoters all wanted me, so they were calling Jim Barnett, and Barnett was booking me out to other territories as often as he could. Whenever he saw me, Barnett would say, "Tony Atlas, you've made me a lot of money." I went to every city where WTBS aired on their cable system. Luckily for me, other than Superstar Billy Graham, Ivan Putski, Rocky Johnson, Ricky Steamboat, and Jimmy Snuka, there weren't many wrestlers built like me during that period. The Magnificent Zulu and Don Ross both had great bodies, but they couldn't work. Today, on the other hand, every other wrestler looks almost like I did. The advantage I had over Graham and Putski was they wouldn't take bumps. Rocky was good about taking bumps and selling for his opponents. Steamboat and Snuka were, too, but

they didn't have my strength.

While I was wrestling in Louisiana in April 1979, Ernie Ladd gave me the phone number for Vincent James McMahon, Sr. [hereafter referred to as Vince, Sr.], the promoter in New York. Ernie said he had already told Vince, Sr. about me. Vince, Sr. gave Ernie his phone number and said, "Have Tony call me." Jim Barnett thought it would enhance my reputation by having me wrestle in what was commonly referred to as the "New York territory," the largest market for wrestling in the U.S.

Three months later, Lori and I were just leaving the house to go out on the town. I was tempted to just keep on going, but instead, I went back inside to answer it. The person on the other end of the line was Vince McMahon, Sr. He said, "Hi, Tony. My name is Vince McMahon. I'm the promoter for the WWF in New York. We've been waiting for you to call. Ernie has been talking you up big here. He said you were vacationing in LA

with your family."

True to form, I was focused in on one thing: going out on the town with Lori. "Can I call you back? I'm late for an appointment."

Two days later, while we were watching television, Lori said, "Why don't you give that man a call? Our money is getting low. We can't live on air forever." I agreed. When I called Vince, Sr. to tell him I was interested in coming to work for him, the first words out of his mouth were, "How long would it take for you to get to New York? We have a lot of plans for you."

I said, "Oh, as soon as I load up my car, I'll drive up there." I told Lori, "Look, I have to go back to work. I'm running out of money and I'm getting strung out, so I have to get away from this stuff for awhile."

Before I continue with my story, I want to make something clear. When I arrived in New York and

met with Vince McMahon, Sr., one of the things he said was, "Tony, a lot of people are going to try to take credit for you being here, but the person responsible is Ernie Ladd." That was the first time I ever heard about a black wrestler having influence over the fortunes of another wrestler. Vince also said, "Whenever Ernie calls, we know what he tells us is good information." More than anybody else, Ernie was the trendsetter for black wrestlers. Ernie became the first black booker when he went to work for Bill Watts in Louisiana. At that time, Watts was an avowed racist, but he later said Ernie changed his attitude towards the black race. Now Ernie was responsible for me getting a shot with the World Wrestling Federation.

The standard procedure for prospective talent was to have them appear on several television shows before booking them on house shows. Vince, Sr. would give them a good build up, and by the time they appeared on the house shows, they were already over with the fans.

Even though I continued to be used regularly in Atlanta, my first match with the WWF took place at the July 31, 1979 TV tapings in Allentown, Pennsylvania. At the time, the WWF taped three shows which would air over a three-week period. I wrestled Ron Lee, Moose Monroe, and John Schmidt on consecutive tapings. That year, I would make subsequent TV tapings on October 23, November 13, and December 4. During those five months, I didn't appear on one single house show, which shows the importance Vince, Sr. placed on promoting and building talent before giving them a push.

When I made my first appearance for the WWF, Vince, Sr. was the matchmaker. The Northeast was broken up into several sections, with different people owning the license and rights to promote their particular area. Gorilla Monsoon promoted New Jersey, Phil Zacko ran the Philadelphia and Baltimore areas, and Arnold Skaaland was the promoter for upstate New York. Vince ran off their licenses for years. He would send the talent

to the towns and the promoters would pay him a booking fee.

Vince, Jr. told me his father eventually discovered that many of the promoters were skimming off the top before the money was sent to the office. They would bring $20,000 into the box office, but would tell Vince, Sr. the house was only $15,000. The extra $5,000 disappeared into their pockets. In order to combat the fraud, Vince took control by creating Titan Sports and changing the name of the promotion from the World-Wide Wrestling Federation [WWWF] to the World Wrestling Federation [WWF]. From then on, the money from the box office would be sent to Vince, and he would pay each promoter their percentage based on the number of points they held in the company.

When I returned to the WWF on October 23, 1979, I wrestled Johnny Rodz. Johnny was everybody's first opponent because Johnny Rodz was a shooter, or what we called a tester. Vince,

Sr. wanted to know how tough you were before he gave you any kind of a push, and Johnny was the professor who gave you your test. He tested every new wrestler who came in. If you stood up to Johnny Rodz, Vince, Sr. knew you had the makings of a champion. If you couldn't hold your own against Johnny, Vince knew better than to promote you too heavily.

When we got into the ring, Johnny began shooting with me, so I shot back. I didn't have his wrestling skill, but I was strong enough to counter any hold he tried to put on me. Eventually, I front face-locked him and held him until he settled down. He had never been beaten, so his pride was hurt.

One day, when we were in a hotel room in Rochester, New York, Johnny said, "You know, I held back a little bit on you in the ring, Tony."

"I did the same thing, Johnny," I countered.

The next thing you know, we were having a

shooting match in the bedroom. I was a lot stronger than Johnny, so I managed to hook him again with a front facelock. As I turned my head, I felt something cold against my neck. It was the blade of a knife. He said, "You may be able to outwrestle me, but I can still take care of myself."

We both cooled down after that and we didn't have any problems. That was just Johnny's way of letting me know he could protect himself. He told me, "That's how we fight, brother. Where you come from, you use your hands. We do, too, but we also have other ways to defend ourselves." That was my first lesson in the ways of Puerto Ricans. I wish Johnny had shared that information with Bruiser Brody. The Puerto Ricans couldn't beat Brody physically, so they used other methods.

That happened a lot, because a lot of times, guys caused problems when they had to do a job. They would hurt you in the ring, which was their way of letting you know the only reason you were winning

was because the promoter wanted you to win.

To everybody's surprise, Johnny couldn't beat me, so they gave me a big push. I love Johnny to death. He was just doing the job they hired him to do, which was to test me to see what I was made of.

The sad thing about professional wrestling is that many of the real athletes never made it to the top, although Vince's top guys were people like Gorilla Monsoon, Iron Sheik, and Bob Backlund, all of whom were legitimate wrestlers. What they did in the ring, they could do outside of the ring. The idea was to make the people believe, and Vince wanted to make sure that whoever he put the championship belt on could take care of himself in the real world. That mindset changed when Hulk Hogan came into the picture. He was probably the first major champion who wasn't what we call a shooter.

I don't have anything bad to say about Hogan,

though. Hogan had a hard time breaking into the business. He played bass guitar in a band in Florida and the promoters didn't want him in the business. They eventually suckered him into a tryout by offering him an opportunity to train with Hiro Matsuda, the resident shooter for the Florida wrestling office. In the process, Matsuda broke Hogan's ankle.

When Hogan came into Georgia in 1979, he used the name Sterling Golden. He was a heel and he was the only guy in the territory who was bigger than me. Tommy Rich and I went to Ole and begged, "Do something with him."

Later that year, when Hogan first went to the WWF, they used him in the middle of the card and semi-finals for almost a year. In 1982 and 1983, he had tremendous success in both the American Wrestling Alliance [Minneapolis, Minnesota] and New Japan Pro Wrestling. When Vince, Jr. decided to go nationwide with his WWF promotion, he invited Hogan to join them. Hogan

was smart. He told Vince, "I want the belt on the first night that I'm in the Garden ... or I'll be on the first airplane out the next morning."

One month after he came in, he won the belt from the Iron Sheik. Bob Backlund refused to drop the belt to Hogan, so they used the Iron Sheik as the interim champion.

I remember going to the office one day. Hulk Hogan was there talking to Vince's son, Shane McMahon. Shane was still a little kid at the time. Hogan flexed his arms and said, "Hey, kid. How would you like to have a 24-inch arm like this?"

Little Shane said, "I'd rather be like my daddy and tell guys with 24-inch arms like you what to do."

Out of the mouths of babes.

I wrestled Shane. Not in the ring, but in the dressing room. One day, he grabbed me from

behind. I felt like a Great White had just latched onto my hand. I thought he was one of the boys, and the first person I thought of was … Iron Sheik. I had seen the Sheik do that to guys just before he proceeded to stretch their ass. I told myself, "Tony, you'd better go, boy." It was one of those "fight and swim or get eaten alive" moments, so I went into attack mode. I began to spin and hooked his arm. Throwing all my weight backwards, I spun around behind him, pulling his arm up behind him at an ungodly angle. As I was going for the lock, I looked up and saw Shane McMahon's face. As our eyes met, I noticed that his were blood red. He looked like he wanted to hit me. I instantly turned off the motors and backed away. As we stood their facing each other, I thought, "I might as well let him punch me. If he does, I'm gonna lay him out, even though I might lose my job over it." Suddenly, the steam went out of both of us and I apologized.

Paul Bearer [Bill Moody] told me that if it had been him, he would have let Shane take him down,

but I didn't know it was Shane. I thought Vince might have brought me back to the WWF to teach me a lesson and had sent the Sheik to do something to me. When I was at the 2007 WWE Hall of Fame inductions, Shane brought up the story. He said, "Tony, I never had much respect for what the guys did because I always thought it was a show. I never knew what you guys were about … until I grabbed you. I realized it then, and I respect the guys so much more because of it."

Shane is a tough kid, but the people wouldn't buy him as a talent because, for the most part, people are visual. He didn't have the size or charisma to draw money.

On the other hand, the fans assume that since Hulk Hogan is such a big, muscular guy, he must be a tough dude who can whip anybody in the world. And yet, when Hulk was the champion, there were probably 20 guys in the dressing room who could mop the floor with him. Hogan beat the Iron Sheik for the WWF title, and yet, if their

match had been a legitimate contest, Sheik could have beaten Hogan in a matter of seconds. When Hogan left Verne Gagne for the WWF in late 1983, Gagne allegedly offered the Iron Sheik $100,000 to break Hogan's leg. When Sheik told Vince about Verne's offer, Vince said, "I'll give you a hundred grand not to."

People say Hulk Hogan was the greatest wrestler of all time, but in my opinion, that honor goes to Andre the Giant. Nobody could beat him in a real contest and nobody could outdraw him.

By November 1979, I was splitting my time between Atlanta, New York, and the Knoxville, Tennessee territory, which at the time was owned by Ron Fuller. In January 1980, Ole Anderson quit his job as booker in Atlanta. One month later, Jim Barnett brought in Buck Robley from Oklahoma to be the new booker. That was the worst thing to happen in Georgia since I began wrestling there. Robley stopped using the guys who were really drawing the money and brought in several of

his own crew. He also brought in a whole list of rules. In late February, just one week after Robley took over, my car, a 1980 Corvette, was stolen from the Falcon's Rest apartment complex. Originally, I saw it on the showroom floor of the Chevrolet dealership and fell in love with it on sight. It was white with a burgundy interior. I walked into the building and told the saleslady, "I want one of those."

"That car is only for display, Tony. They'll be here the first of the year."

I reached into my pocket and said, "I want this car now."

I pulled out a wad of cash and we came to an agreement. They opened the showroom doors and the lady sat on the seat beside me as we drove to the bank to get the balance of the money owed. That was the life I was living. I had plenty of money and I was carefree. I took the lady back to the dealership and drove it to the matches that

night. One month later, the car was stolen, which brings us back to where this story began.

The wrestling shows routinely began at eight o'clock at night., and one of Robley's rules was that everybody had to be in the dressing room at the arenas by seven o'clock. If anybody was late, they would be fired. One night, I called Charlie McGowan, one of the referees who worked in the office, and told him, "Charlie, I'll be a few minutes late for the show tonight. My car was stolen, but the police found it, so I'm going to pick it up."

I claimed my car and drove to the town, arriving at 7:15. When I walked into the dressing room, Tommy Rich said, "Tony, I hate to tell you this, but you've been fired."

"You've gotta be kidding me."

"No. You'd better talk to Robley."

When I told Robley about my situation, he said, "Sorry, kid. The rule is the rule."

Lori, my common-law wife at the time, was ready to go home to California, so I called her and asked, "Are you still going back to California next week?"

"Yeah."

"I don't have a job no more. I'll go with you."

I left a week later. I didn't have a job and there were no opportunities in the making to wrestle anywhere else, so I was going to have fun with Lori. I had worked every day for five years without having a day off, so I was going to take a vacation with Lori and enjoy her great feet (more on that later).

My firing didn't last long. In less than a week, I was back in Atlanta and was making occasional shots in both New York and Houston. Incidentally, Ole was back in charge by May, so Robley's time in power lasted just a little more than a month.

In addition to wrestling in Atlanta, during the

months that followed, I was making occasional stops in both New York and Houston. In fact, on January 18, I made my first house show appearance for the WWWF at the Capital Centre in Landover, Maryland, against Swede Hanson. Three nights later, I was wrestling Swede again, only this time, we were wrestling in Madison Square Garden.

From January 1980 until August 1981, I wrestled for the WWF anywhere from one to three times a month. In August, I was with the company on a full-time basis.

Chapter 10
Mr. U.S.A.

In 1979, Jimmy Snuka, Ricky Steamboat, Frank Monte, and I all entered bodybuilding contests promoted by the World Bodybuilding Guild (WBBG) in Charlotte. We didn't want to compete

against each other, so Jimmy, Ricky and Frank all entered the Mr. North Carolina contest. I had won Mr. North Carolina the year before, so I couldn't enter it again. When you win a contest, you have to move to a higher level, so I entered the Mr. Southern Hemisphere contest, a regional title. In the Mr. North Carolina competition, Steamboat, Snuka, and Monte won first, second, and third place, respectively. Ricky had the edge over Snuka because Snuka had a thick waistline. I took the top spot in the Mr. Southern Hemisphere contest.

There were several bodybuilders in the wrestling business, but very few of them had the complete package. Frank wasn't very tall, but he was one hell of a worker in the ring. In my opinion, he never really got the recognition or push he deserved. To be honest, Frank Monte had the perfect physique on the day of the Mr. North Carolina contest. He had a better body than all of us—me, Steamboat, and Snuka—because he had the full package. Along with an impressive upper

body, he also had the calves and thighs, which very few of us had. However, I believe Steamboat and I were so popular the WBBG officials let us win, simply for the reason of who we were.

In the wrestling business, Frank, Steve Strong, and Ivan Putski could boast of having that full package. Omar Atlas came in and out of the Charlotte territory, but for the most part, he was just arms and shoulders. I got Kevin Sullivan his start in bodybuilding. The old Kevin had no muscles. I helped train him when he won Mr. Tennessee. Superstar Billy Graham had a great build for wrestling, but not for bodybuilding competition. He had good arms, chest and back muscles, but he didn't have the pecs [pectorals] or legs necessary for a serious contest. I never developed my calves, but I did have good thighs. From the knees up, I had it going, but I never knew what to do to build my calves.

I believe the bodybuilding judges also took into consideration the value of who would do the

bodybuilding business the most good. At the time, bodybuilding wasn't a major sport like it is today. If they had a guy like me as the winner of their contest, someone who was on television every week, that would give them a lot of credibility, not to mention TV coverage.

Later that same year, I won second place in the Tall division of the 1979 WBBG Pro Mr. America and took first place in the 1979 WBBG Pro Mr. USA contests.

In the old days, wrestlers had a lot of pride. We were very protective of the business and our careers. The promoters didn't like us to enter any competition outside of the wrestling arena because they were afraid we would lose and it would reflect badly on the wrestling business. When I told George Scott I was going to enter the Mr. USA contest in 1979, he told me, "Okay. Yeah, Tony. You can go to the contest."

Having secured permission, I immediately began

to train and diet. Most of the boys helped me. They had a vested interest in my success because if I won, it would reflect well on both them and the wrestling business. Paul Jones and Wahoo McDaniel's idea of helping me was to prevent me from drinking beer when we were on the road together. "Oh, no, kid. You can't drink that beer." I think they got some kind of perverse enjoyment from denying me that pleasure. Rufus R. Jones was so encouraging. He really wanted me to win. I don't know anybody who can say anything bad about Rufus. He wouldn't tell you anything that wouldn't help you. I can say the same thing about Ernie Ladd. They were just good people. I remember Rufus telling me, "Tony, never answer the phone on your days off. If you do, you won't have a day off."

That was true, because most of the time, when the telephone rang on your day off, it was somebody from the office calling to put you to work. The promoters had a reason for doing that. They didn't want the boys to be involved in anything

else. They were afraid they would get into other professions, like real estate, or acting, and realize they could make a good living without taking bumps. They had the wrestlers convinced that wrestling was the only way they could possibly make a decent living. To keep them from getting involved with anything else, they kept them busy as much as possible. The promoters wanted the boys on the road so they didn't have time to get involved in anything other than wrestling.

On the morning of the Mr. USA contest, my telephone rang. Remembering what Rufus had told me, I didn't answer it. Lori and I flew to New York and checked into the Holiday Inn by LaGuardia Airport. I went to the contest that night and won the Mr. USA title.

The next morning, the phone rang. It was George Scott. "Tony. I need you to come to the office immediately." I had a good idea of what George wanted. As I got dressed to go, Rufus said, "Take the Mister USA trophy with you, Tony."

Several of the guys were at the office when I walked in, and they all began saying things like, "Oh, you're in trouble now, kid."

George Scott didn't look happy when I walked into his office. When I set the trophy on his desk, he asked, "What place did you get?"

"I won," I said.

"You won what? Is this trophy for second place?"

"I'm Mister USA."

"You're telling me you won?"

"Yeah."

"The whole thing?"

"Yeah."

"The whole contest?"

"Yeah. I won the whole kit and kaboodle. I am Mister USA."

The look on his face and his whole attitude changed. "Oh! We're so proud of you, kid. I knew you could do it."

After that, I got pats on the back and a lot of attention from everybody in the office.

As I was leaving, I stopped to talk with Klondike Bill. Klondike said, "You've got to be the luckiest man who ever lived."

"Why?"

He said, "For three hours, they've been ranting and raving about what they're gonna tell you about embarrassing the business."

I was later told George Scott had booked me on a show and tried to get in touch with me at the last minute. Of course, when he called, thanks to the suggestion from Rufus, I was nowhere to be

found. When George called me to the office that morning, he had planned to give me a royal tongue-lashing, but when I set the trophy on the desk, his whole tune changed.

After I won the Mr. USA and Mr. Southern Hemisphere contests, one of the things that really bothered me was the coverage the wrestling promoters gave Ricky Steamboat for winning the Mr. North Carolina contest. I didn't resent the fact that Ricky was recognized for his achievement, but they pushed his accomplishment more than mine. I thought it was because of my color. We (black people) were always thinking that, but the truth of the matter was George Scott knew nothing was going to top my winning of the Mr. USA title. I didn't need the promotion. On the other hand, they were trying to get Steamboat over. That was the same reasoning they used when they made their decisions about who would get the Mid-Atlantic title. Andre the Giant didn't need a belt to get over, but other wrestlers did. However, I took it at the time that they cared more about Steamboat than

they did me. It was like sibling rivalry. I have a good pair of shoes, but my brother doesn't, so my mother goes out and buys him a new pair. Even though I don't need the shoes, I get mad because he got new shoes and I didn't. When I got older, and became mature enough to evaluate that kind of thing, I knew that wasn't the case. I was just a stupid kid who didn't know any better.

When I broke into the business, my goal was to be stronger than anybody else. I don't know where my strength came from, but I could do a 650-pound bench press, a 400-pound military press, squat with 800 pounds, and curl 350. And yet, in my opinion, there were several old-timers who, more than likely, were stronger than me. They just didn't get the publicity we did. The strongest man in our business was Don Leo Jonathan. To look at him, you wouldn't know it because he didn't look like a bodybuilder and he didn't have bulging muscles. As far as I know, he didn't even work out, but I used to wish I had his strength. Years ago, when Don was working with Bill White, the

heat got so intense that the people rushed the ring. Don and Bill jumped out of the ring. Don told Bill to squat down, and then he picked up the bottom of the ring and put it on its side. Those rings weighed around 1,500 pounds, and yet, he managed to upend it through sheer strength.

Danny Hodge wasn't a big man, but he can still squeeze a pair of pliers in one hand and break them. If he grabbed your ankle, he could apply so much pressure that your foot would go numb. He hated to be on the opening match. If he was, he would strip the gears in the shutoff valve when he turned off the water after taking his shower. The boys who tried to take a shower later in the night would complain to the promoter, "Don't put Danny on first. We can't take showers if he gets in there first." Danny is one of the nicest guys you will ever have the opportunity to meet, but from the stories I've heard, I'm glad I never worked with him.

I was lucky I came along at the time I did, and I

feel very fortunate to have rubbed elbows with guys like Don Leo and Danny. Their stories gave me an opportunity to learn about the past and benefit from their experiences.

Andre the Giant was extremely strong. One night, a wrestling fan in a Chinese restaurant kept bothering Andre while he was eating. The guy weighed about 280 pounds. Andre eventually tired of the guy and backhanded him. He didn't hit him hard, but the guy laid on the floor for a long time. I thought he was dead. Andre would throw Blackjack Mulligan around the ring like he was a rag doll, and Mulligan weighed every bit of 340 pounds.

Ole came up with the idea to parlay my strength into a wrestling angle. Ole told me a story about the first time they did an angle with weights. They did it with Bill Eadie, who was wrestling as the Masked Superstar. The weights were made out of wood, so they only weighed about 135 pounds. When they were finished with the angle,

they told one of the camera crew, a skinny guy, to remove the weights from the ring. He ran out, picked them up, and ran off the set … right in front of the wrestling fans. Ole wasn't going to risk an expose like that again, so he insisted we use real weights. He even let people come into the ring and try to bench press them. It was funny to watch the weights fall onto their chest. They said things like, "That's for real, man," and "That's the real deal."

For angles with weights, my rule of thumb was to use the amount of weight with which I could do eight reps. Ten to 12 reps is considered high reps, while six to eight reps is low reps. If I could do eight reps of a particular lift, which was just below the middle of the road, that was usually a good number for me to play with.

In addition to the weights they would use in the ring, they had another set of weights in the back of the TV studio with which I could warm up. I would begin with 225 pounds, and then move on to 315, 405, and finally, 500 pounds.

I could do eight reps of 500 pounds on the bench press. That was light for me. My maximum on the bench was 650 pounds. In the ring, I would do a 500-pound bench, but I couldn't mess around with it too long. I had to bring the weight down and pop it right back up. Ole would get mad if I lifted it too easily or quickly. "Take your time when you bring them up! You can't make it look too easy."

"But it's 500 pounds, Ole!"

"I don't give a shit! You're doing it too fast."

One time, Ole got the bright idea to have Dusty Rhodes spot me. I think Dusty got in Ole's ear because he wanted to interject himself into the limelight. Paul Jones wanted to spot me, too, but I wanted Pistol Pez Whatley to be my spotter. Pez was my training partner. He had a 500-pound bench, too. He couldn't do it easily, but he could do it. Tom Jones could, too. The reason those guys never got promoted, though, is because they couldn't draw. I'm not saying that to demean

them. It's just a fact. People didn't buy tickets to see them. They were good wrestlers, but they weren't appealing to the public. They didn't have the charisma needed by a main event performer.

When I told Ole I wanted Pez to come out and spot me, he overruled me and said, "No, it'll look better if Dusty spots you."

Like every other time I did it, I pushed the 500 pounds up off the uprights with relative ease. Just as the bar left the uprights, though, Dusty began to stomp his feet and clap his hands. He was trying to get the crowd going.

You have to remember. Dusty has probably never worked out a day in his life. When he began stomping and jumping, the ring became a trampoline. Picture this. I'm lying down on a bench in the ring, holding 500 pounds above me, and the ring is bouncing up and down. I'm trying to hold the weight up. At the same time, I'm trying to tell Dusty, "Hold still, brother! Please hold

still." He was killing me. I don't know how I did it, but I managed to lower the bar to my chest and push it back up. I did pull a pectoral muscle in my chest in the process, though. I was lucky the injury wasn't serious because it could have ended my career, and I never held any animosity toward Dusty because he didn't know any better. When he did the shuffling in the ring, he thought he was doing me a favor by getting the people worked up.

The only time I did 600 pounds in the ring was in March 1982 when I was wrestling in Japan. They decided to have a bench press competition between the Japanese wrestlers and the Americans. It all began when Don Muraco, Iron Sheik, and I went to the gym with one of the Japanese guys who was really into weightlifting. The next time he saw Antonio Inoki, he told him how much I was lifting. Inoki said, "We need to have Tony do that for the fans." They put the contest together just so I could do the lift. I did 484 pounds, which was the maximum amount of weight they had. When I finished, I began

waving my arms and yelling, "More weight! More weight!" The spotters held up their hands and said, "No more weight!" That was the night when Dick Murdoch did a 350-pound bench. I was amazed because (as far as I know) Murdoch never worked out a day in his life.

Ole came up with another "great idea" for me to do with Pak Song, who was managed by Rock Hunter at the time. "We've worn out the bench press angle," Ole said. "We're gonna do something else with the weights."

I trusted Ole, so I just shrugged and said, "Okay."

"How much can you military press?"

"I think I can get 400 pounds over my head, but me and Ken Patera used to do presses behind the neck with 315 pounds."

Ole never let me do my max. He was afraid it would look bad if I missed it. Ole worked out religiously, and he knew there were times when

you didn't always get your max. "If you can do reps with 315, then we'll work with that. I want you to do a military press in the ring with 315 pounds. When you get the weight overhead, Pak will give you a karate chop to the throat, causing you to fall backwards with the weights on top of you."

"What?"

As I said, that was another one of Ole's ideas, but it worked. We drew good money from those ideas.

Pak was a legitimate karate guy. The promoters would have fans bring rocks to the television studio and he would break them with his bare hands. When I wrestled Pak, every now and then he would throw in a chop that let me know he was legitimate. They hurt down to the bone. In contrast to his ring character, Pak was one of the nicest persons I had ever met in my life. He spoke very little English, so he let his manager, Rock Hunter, do his talking on television. Behind the scenes, he

made attempts to talk to the American wrestlers, but we had a lot of trouble communicating.

From 1975 to 1992, I bench pressed 500 pounds twice a week. You can talk to any bodybuilder and they'll say that's impossible. During one two-week period in Georgia, I bench pressed 500 pounds in the ring every night of the week. As I said, my maximum bench was 650 pounds.

When I won the WBBG Mr. USA title in 1979, Dan Lurie was the owner of the WBBG [World Body Building Guild] and the promoter of the contest. Bob Hoffman ran the AAU [Amateur Athletic Union] bodybuilding and powerlifting contests, but I never met him. Joe Weider, however, was the face of bodybuilding by that time. He and his brother, Ben, founded the IFBB [International Federation of Body Builders] in 1948 and became the top bodybuilding promotion in the world. Joe Weider was to bodybuilding what Vince McMahon, Jr. was to wrestling. He set his sights on expanding the bodybuilding

industry and becoming the top promoter in his field. By 1979, Dan Lurie's WBBG was on its last legs and Dan was hanging on for dear life.

In 1982, Jim Manion formed the NPC [National Physique Committee]. On October 1-2, they held the first NPC National Bodybuilding Championships in New York. The contest was originally billed as the Mr. America contest, but the AAU owned the rights to the name, so that night, Jim changed the name of the contest to the NPC Nationals. They structured the classes by weight—heavyweight, light heavyweight, middleweight, and lightweight. I always competed in the heavyweight class, or the tall class when the classes were structured by height. That night, the top three finishers were Lee Haney, Matt Mendenhall, and Bob Paris, while I placed 15th. The following year, Ivan Putski entered and placed 18th.

I met a lot of the bodybuilding legends during the years I trained and competed in bodybuilding. I

worked out with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Lou Ferrigno, but if Ferrigno hadn't starred in the TV series, The Incredible Hulk, the general public wouldn't even know who he was. That's the difference between bodybuilding and professional wrestling. Outside of bodybuilding and weightlifting circles, nobody could name the Mr. America, Mr. USA, or Mr. Universe winners. To make a name for yourself that would be recognizable to the general public, you had to be a TV star. The only other way for a bodybuilder to become known to the general public was to win the Mr. Olympia contest, although, for that matter, I don't think many people knew anything about that, either.

One day, Lori and I went to see the James Bond movie, Moonraker. When we pulled up to the movie theater, Lori said, "There goes Arnold." As I got out of the car, I looked at him, and he turned and looked at me. As I turned my back to lock the car, Lori said, "Here comes Arnold."

When I turned back around, I saw Arnold running towards me. He stopped like he had put on the brakes, like you would if you were trying to avoid being hit by a car. He said, "I thought you were Sergio (Olivia). You have big arms and a big chest. How big is your waist?"

I said, "Twenty-eight inches."

He said, "Why, you even have the little waist like Sergio. You look great."

He turned right around and jogged back.

Muhammad Ali thought I was George Foreman, one of his greatest opponents, and Arnold thought I was Sergio Oliva, a weightlifter from Cuba who was Arnold's biggest bodybuilding rival. The weird thing about the whole incident was when we got inside, the movie theater was packed, but there were two seats right beside Arnold. I put Lori between us. He grinned at me and said, "Thanks. I don't think we could have fit next to each

other." Lori wasn't too happy, though. She was squashed between the two of us.

One afternoon at the gym, Arnold walked up and handed me his business card. He said, "I'm starring in a movie and we need a big, muscular black man. I told the producer all about you. I want you in this movie. A body like yours should be in the movies. Don't worry. I have a lot of influence."

Lori said, "Don't lose that card. Make sure you call that man." Of course, I didn't call him. When I saw the movie Conan the Destroyer, Wilt Chamberlain was in my role. Or, what should have been my part.

I also met Dave Draper, who, at one time, was being touted by Joe Weider as his next big star. Dave, who had appeared on several TV shows, including The Beverly Hillbillies, The Monkees, and Here Come the Brides, sported 24-inch arms, which were a rarity in those days. In

1970, Dave went to New York to compete in the Mr. Olympia contest. For some reason, he decided he didn't want it. Hours before the contest, he got on a plane and flew back to California. From what I understand, Dave loved working out, but he hated being on stage. He didn't like being in the limelight. In my opinion, he could have electrified bodybuilding because he had a physique better than that of anybody else. People say Dave was in better shape than Arnold that night, but Arnold won the contest by default.

One of the guys who always seemed to fall under Arnold's shadow was Franco Colombo. Again, it's just my opinion, but Franco was as good as Arnold and much stronger.

The guy who impressed me the most, though, was Sergio Oliva. The bad thing about Sergio was that people thought he was unbeatable. He had no flaws. Arnold, Ferrigno, and I, all had good upper bodies, but we didn't have the legs to match. Sergio had massive legs that matched his

upper body. So, when he entered the Mr. Universe contest, some of the big guns refused to compete. That didn't happen when Arnold entered contests because his fellow bodybuilders thought they could beat him.

I never had the privilege of meeting Larry Scott, the first bodybuilder to hold the IFBB Mr. Olympia title. Scott won the title in both 1965 and 1966, then retired because he didn't like the direction in which bodybuilding was headed. The following year, Sergio Oliva won the title, but due to Scott's retirement, he never had the opportunity to prove he could beat him.

I did, however, meet Frank Zane, the man who changed the face of bodybuilding. When I met him at the airport in Las Vegas, he weighed less than 200 pounds. He actually knew who I was, which really shocked me. I shouldn't have been surprised, though. At the time, wrestling was on television every week, and SuperStation TBS carried the Georgia show to every corner of our

country. When I competed, we went out on stage and gave our best arm, back, chest, and leg poses. We each had an opportunity to win one of those categories, as well as Most Muscular. Ivan Putski always had good legs, while my chest and arms were superior to a lot of other bodybuilders. What Frank Zane brought to the table, however, was symmetry. Not only did he have superior muscularity in the different body parts, but he developed those parts in perfect proportion to one another.

I was really impressed with some of the female weightlifters I've seen over the years, too. One day, I was in Gold's Gym in Santa Monica, and a girl named Polo came in. I was benching 500 and Lou Ferrigno was spotting me. A guy on a bench nearby was doing 225 pounds. With no warmup, Polo jumped in and did seven reps. That really impressed me. When I was in Texas, I saw women leg press 800 pounds, but that was nothing compared to what my friend, Amanda Storm, could do. She put 1,000 pounds on the leg press machine

and did six reps. Her maximum (one rep) was 1,200 pounds. Another time, I saw her stand flat-footed and press 200 pounds over her head.

In bodybuilding, strings were pulled, and I hate to admit it, but I had all the strings on my side. I was Tony Atlas. When I was walking out after winning the WBBG Mr. USA contest, a girl swore her husband should have won. She said, "I knew they would give it to Tony Atlas." Later, when I was with the NPC, I asked (Kenneth) "Doc" Neely about it. Doc, who owned Doc's Gym, supported and promoted local and regional NPC bodybuilding contests in Georgia. He said, "Nobody was going to beat you that night, Tony. You were on. You won that contest."

There were a lot of expenses that went along with entering bodybuilding contests. First, you had to join whatever organization was sponsoring the contest. It cost $60 to become a member of the NPC. The contest fee was another $60. When you add food, transportation, and a hotel into the cost,

it runs a tidy sum.

It would take the average person three years to become the best bodybuilder in the world. That's all it would take. I believe ninety percent of bodybuilding is mental. It is not a purely physical thing. Even given superior genetics, you can't turn a 12-inch arm into a 24-inch arm without a lot of mental effort. You can do curls until you're blue in the face, but you won't get bigger until you have a picture in your head of what you want your arms to look like. Your brain sends a signal to your arms that will initiate the metamorphosis. You can walk into any gym and see people who have been lifting weights faithfully for most of their lives, but they have no muscles to speak of. Physically, they're lifting the weights, but they don't have the mental effort necessary to make those muscles grow. It sounds funny when I say this, but what helped my bodybuilding career was a lack of knowledge. I didn't have any negative thoughts to weigh me down, so I believed whatever I was told. I had the positive mental attitude I needed to make my

workouts work more effectively. When I asked my trainers what I needed to do to make my arms bigger, they said, "Do curls." So I did curls, and while I did, I was thinking, "Wow! I'm doing curls. My arms are going to get big!"

When I was working out at the YMCA, I wanted to increase the amount of weight I could bench press. For a while, nothing seemed to work, until Jackie Cooper told me, "Tony, you have to eat it, think it, and sleep it." The next thing I knew, my bench shot straight up.

Charles Atlas built his body without using weights. Arnold Schwarzenegger once told me, "Tony, if you can build a 50-inch chest by lifting 200 pounds, why would you want to increase it to 500 pounds? You don't need heavier weights. You need to concentrate and use more of your mind to will those muscles to grow."

Steve Aegis, my trainer at Holiday Health Spa, built up his arms to 19 inches, and he never used

anything heavier than a 35-pound dumbbell. I built my arms by doing curls with 100- and 150-pound dumbbells. Arnold did the same thing, but I did low reps, while he did high reps. I never did more than five reps with the dumbbells. Arnold would do 10. And yet, we both had 22-inch arms.

I don't think genetics have as much to do with great bodybuilders as people would want us to believe. In my opinion, the only bodybuilder I knew who had good genetics was Franco Colombo. Franco was just as good as Arnold, and he was twice as strong. Arnold and I were both skinny kids. I didn't start lifting until I was 18, but two years later, I had a great body.

I'm not saying genetics don't play any part at all. My grandfather's nickname was "Big Arms." My mother had big arms. My brothers, Charles and Walter, have big arms, too. We are the big arm family! I often wondered if we were related to the Armstrongs. Bob Armstrong and his boys all have big arms. I thought my family was

the only family like that, but Bob Armstrong's family and mine are very similar. We have the same build: long legs, big arms, and wide shoulders. Come to think of it, Bob was like a father to me. Maybe I should have called myself Tony Armstrong.

In 2007, my brother, Charles, was working at the Hotel Roanoke and Conference Center, the hotel where my mother worked as a cook. When I was at the WWE Hall of Fame in 2007, Big Show [Paul Wight] told me he met Charles when he stayed there. Big Show said he loves to eat there because Charles always gives him an extra-thick steak. He asked Charles why he never got into wrestling, because Charles was bigger than me. Most people don't know this, but at one time, Ole Anderson was going to break Charles into the business. Charles was 6-foot-4, weighed about 280, and was much stronger than me. I only weighed 250 at the time. Ole said, "Your brother is a giant Tony Atlas." After training for three weeks, Charles told Ole he didn't want to be a wrestler. Training

to be a wrestler was hard work, and Charles didn't want to do that. Charles is very sensitive, and Ole, being one of the toughest guys in the business, probably gave him a hard time on the mat. I was used to somebody like Ole being rough with me because I played sports in school, but Charles didn't. He was just naturally big and strong. He wanted to be a singer. Ole said, "That's great. We can make you a singing wrestler. Let me hear you sing, kid."

After Charles sang a few bars of a song, Ole said, "Forget it, kid. You'll never be a fucking singer."

Charles changed as he grew and matured, but when he was young, he always got the best jobs. However, as soon as he got a few paychecks, he would quit.

Bodybuilding is one of the hardest things to do because you have to manage your own business, and that's why it's so hard for people to develop outstanding physiques. People on the treadmill

don't concentrate on their body. They train while they read a magazine, or watch a television show. Guys will do a set of one exercise or another, and then they'll chat with other people for a few minutes. They don't focus their total concentration on the exercise they're doing, or the muscle group they're working.

In my day, the gym wasn't recreational. We were serious about the reason why we were there. We went for one reason and one reason only: to train for a meet, to develop our bodies, or to increase our strength. Those were our only goals. We didn't go there to socialize. If you want to make people at a gym angry, talk to them while they're in the middle of their workout.

I always enjoyed working out at Gold's Gym. The first Gold's Gym was opened in Venice Beach in 1965 by a man named Joe Gold. After Pete Grymkowski bought the Gold's Gym franchise in 1979 with two other partners, Joe opened another gym called World Gym. I would see Joe

and he would tell me to go to World Gym, but I was good friends with Pete, so I wouldn't go there. On the other hand, Arnold Schwarzenegger wouldn't go to Gold's because of his friendship with Joe. Joe Weider promoted Arnold, but it was Joe Gold who really built Arnold.

The gyms have changed a bit since the early days, but for a long time, they were no-frills gyms for serious weightlifters. They were not a place for socializing. When I first began working out at Gold's, a man tried to draw me into a conversation about wrestling. The owner pulled him aside and said, "We're happy to have you here, but you can't bother the guests. There's no socializing on the floor."

Lou Ferrigno was loyal to Gold's Gym. The first time I met Lou, he was working out at Gold's in Santa Monica. When he noticed how serious I was about my training, he invited me to work out with him. One morning, after we had been training together for several weeks, I began talking with a

guy about my career in wrestling. Lou turned around and said, "Tony, the reason I like working out with you is you don't talk." We never worked out together again after that.

There was a lot of temptation in wrestling. After a match, a lot of the guys would throw on their clothes, without showering, and rush back to the hotel bar. When the bar closed, they would look for an after-hours joint. The next day, they would be sleeping on the airplane, and they would smell like they hadn't showered for days, and in many cases, they hadn't.

They would complain about being tired. "Vince is working us too hard!"

No, he wasn't. Vince didn't send them to the bars, and the after-hour joints weren't on their booking sheets.

Discipline was the key in both bodybuilding and wrestling. I had a relationship with gym owners in

every town, so I always had a place to workout. I also went to bed by midnight, no matter what. I always had things I needed to do the next day, and I couldn't do them if I didn't have proper rest.

I knew I wasn't the best worker in the business. I wasn't the best wrestler, either. My reputation was built around my physique. I knew when people came to see me at the arenas, they wanted to see Tony Atlas, not somebody who was fat and out of shape. There were times when I would leave the hotel for the gym. The other guys would be sitting around the pool, drinking Piña Coladas with good-looking girls in bikinis. They would make fun of me and say things like, "Hey, Tony! Do a rep for me!" That never bothered me. I always remembered what Wahoo McDaniel told me. "Tony, don't cut the fans short. You have to give the people one-hundred-ten percent of your ability, and that includes keeping your body in shape. And if you're not blown up when you come back to the dressing room after your match, you didn't work hard enough."

When I got ready for a bodybuilding contest, the only thing I could eat was meat, salad, and water. I could always find nutritious food when I was on the road. It just cost more money than most people were willing to spend. When I went to a hotel room, I would order a prime rib and egg whites. I tipped well and they gave me what I wanted. When I flew into a town, I would avoid the airport food and fast food restaurants, and find a place where I could order meat and vegetables. We called those places knife-and-fork restaurants. I could go to a truckstop and order a house salad, steak, chicken, or pork chops. In the mornings after I worked out, I would eat steak and eggs. I passed on the toast and hash browns. "Just bring me six egg whites and a T-bone steak."

I knew I had to be disciplined about my body because that was what was making me money. If I lost that, I wouldn't have anything to fall back on. Being Tony Atlas meant more to me than hanging out in the bars. Sure, I went to bars, but I only went to the bars where I could eat and

drink. I would order chicken wings, pull off the skin, and eat the white meat. There isn't that much meat on wings, so it wasn't unusual for me to spend $50 a night for a platter of them.

I didn't build my body through the use of steroids. I used them later in my career, but I didn't use them to get there. That's why I still have my muscles today. I went to a seminar at a gym in the Charlotte area. They talked about a test where a doctor gave six people steroids, and placebos to another six. At the end of six weeks, they all made the same gains. The guy who was taking the placebos thought he was taking steroids, so his muscles grew. Once again, I believe the mental attitude is what makes the difference. I never took supplements, either. When I won the first Mr. USA contest in 1979, they took me to the factory in New Jersey where they made the protein supplements. There was a big bowl with a device hanging inside that looked like a cake mixer. I noticed the stuff coming out of the bowl went into cans, but they put different labels on the cans, even

though it all came from the same mix. They did the same thing with the weight loss supplements.

Ken Patera was a weightlifter, while I was a powerlifter and bodybuilder, so we did different exercises and trained different muscles. Ken did a lot of squats because the legs were the foundation for heavy lifting, but he wouldn't do barbell curls because he didn't want to develop his biceps. One of the lifts Ken did in the Olympics was the "clean and jerk." For the "clean," the lifter must pull the weight from the platform to his shoulders in one motion. After bringing up the weights, the weights rest on the front of the shoulders, and the "jerk" follows as the lifter pushes the bar overhead. If your biceps are too big, the weight won't reach the shoulders because your arms won't bend that far.

I beat Ken Patera on the bench press, pull downs, and curls. If you put Patera and me on a bench, I would wear him out. I warm up with his bench. I also did a lot of pull-downs because they gave my physique a nice V-shape. However, when it came

to squats, deadlifts, and the overhead press, I didn't have a prayer against Ken. One day, after I squatted 600 pounds in the gym, I looked around to see if anyone was looking at me. Charles Brown saw me and knew what I was doing. He said, "You won't get any attention for that. Anybody in here can do that." When I boosted my squat to 800 pounds, I got a few looks.

Ken began bodybuilding when he realized people were impressed by what they saw. When he was heavy, he was stronger than he was when he was cut up and muscular, but he didn't look as strong. In one angle on television, he lifted against Superstar Billy Graham. Ken won the contest, but the fans all thought it was fake because Superstar was so muscular and impressive-looking. In a legitimate contest, Superstar wouldn't have had a chance against Patera in a contest of strength. Ken was the first American to clean and jerk 500 pounds over his head and the only American to press 500 pounds over his head, a record which stands to this day.

In my opinion, the most egotistical bodybuilder in the wrestling business was Lex Luger. He was so vain he always dressed in front of a mirror. Whenever he would get up to go to the bathroom, the guys would move the mirror. When Lex came back, he would sit wherever the mirror was so he could look at his body. In 1993, when Lex played a character called the Narcissist, he would stand in the ring and pose in front of the mirror before his match. The character, however, was legitimate. Lex was a narcissist in real life.

Chapter 11
Big Arms, Skinny Necks

By the time I began wrestling for the WWF, my interview skills had really improved. I had discovered that the best way for me to do interviews was to combine wrestling with my personal life. Pat Patterson used to tell me, "Tony, you know how to tie it together."

What he meant was when I began talking, the people would be thinking, "What is he talking about?" But by the end of my promo, I tied everything together.

One time, after I did an interview for a match against John Studd, Pat Patterson told me, at first, he couldn't figure out where I had been going with the story I was telling. I had been talking about hunting. Pat said he sat there and listened to the interview. It went something like, "John Studd! When I was a kid, my father used to take me rabbit huntin'. When you hunt rabbits or squirrels, you don't use a big gun. You use a shotgun. But, while you're out in those woods, you've always gotta remember that the rabbit ain't the only one livin' in those woods."

Pat was sitting in the back, thinking, "What the hell is he talking about?"

He couldn't figure out what hunting had to do with John Studd. I said, "Once in awhile, when

you're out huntin' the rabbit, you run across something a little bit bigger than the rabbit, like a bear. Now, buckshot's not gonna bring down a bear, so what a smart hunter will do is carry some punkin' balls. They're like a big wad of buckshot. A lot of guys will carry a 357, or a .44, just in case they run across bigger game. And I learned from them hunters. John Studd, I'm only 6-foot-3, 265 pounds. You're 6-foot-8, 365 pounds. But when I get in the ring with you, John Studd, I know I ain't rabbit huntin' no more. I'm bear huntin'. I'm not bringin' buckshot. I'm gonna bring them punkin' balls."

Then I flexed my muscles and said, "Here's your punkin' balls: 22-1/2 inch arms, along with a 650-pound bench press, 420-pound overhead press, and the speed, and the determination, and the heart to go in there and bring down the big bear, John Studd."

Pat came running out of the dressing room and said, "How in the world did you tie all that

together? You were talkin' about buckshot, rifles, punkin' balls. For the first few minutes, I thought you were on drugs or something, but by the end of the interview, you tied it all together. That was a great interview."

Every time I went to the dressing room after I did an interview, I would walk over to the Grand Wizard and ask, "How was that, Wizard?"

He would look at his forearms and say, "Ahh, it was okay."

Later, I would do another interview. I'd walk over and ask, "How was that interview, Wizard?"

Again, he would look at his forearms, and say, "Ohhh! I got the goose bumps. I got the goose bumps."

When he said that, I knew it was a good interview. The Wizard told me he really did get goose bumps when he heard good interviews. One of the things that made the Wizard such a good a

manager was that he never stopped being a fan. He was able to experience what the fans felt. He told me he would watch the guys in the ring so when Vince asked him who he wanted to manage, he knew who to take. If he watched somebody in the ring and didn't get a reaction, he didn't want anything to do with them. When another guy would get into the ring, and Wizard got goose bumps, that was who he asked to manage. He had that instinct. He was like an actor who knows a good script when he reads it.

On February 7, 1981, I was wrestling in Baltimore against Sgt. Slaughter. I picked him up, pressed him overhead, and press slammed him. I was going over [winning the match] that night, so after I slammed him to the mat, I beat him with the sleeper. When I got back to the dressing room, Arnold Skaaland took me aside and said, "Tony, you should have covered him after the slam."

It dawned on me that I hadn't been listening to the people in the audience. At the time, the press slam

was one of the most devastating-looking moves in the business. The next day, when Arnold told Vince, Sr. about it, Vince said, "From now on, Tony, when it's time for you to go home, I want you to press slam your opponent. I don't want you using the sleeper any more."

That's exactly what I did. From that point forward, the press slam was my only finish.

I was treated so well by Vince, Sr. From January 1980 until June 1982, other than two double count-outs and a match stopped by the curfew, they gave me 15 straight wins in Madison Square Garden.

In my day, if two wrestlers had a problem, they settled it in the ring. We respected each other because we knew what each of us could do in a competitive situation. Jimmy Snuka liked to compete just for fun. You have to fight him before he'll consider you to be a friend. Afa and Sika, the Wild Samoans, had the same requirement. It sounds strange, but that's their way of bonding. I

was riding with them one day. They stopped the car on the side of the highway, jumped out, fought on the shoulder of the road, and then jumped back in and began driving again. They weren't fooling around. They were going all-out. That was fun for them. It was part of their culture.

I was with Sika and Afa in Boston one time. They had been up all night, drinking. The next morning, Sika went out to his Lincoln Town Car to get something. The temperature was below freezing and the ground was covered in snow, and yet, he was wearing flip-flops, a lava-lava, and an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt. He got what he wanted out of the trunk and shut the lid. Unfortunately, he left his keys in the trunk. Sika decided to wave somebody down to help him open the trunk. Would you stop to help a guy who stands 6-foot-4, weighs 350 pounds, has big, wooly hair, and is wearing a lava-lava and flip-flops? Neither did anyone else. When nobody would stop, Sika got mad. He grabbed the back of the car, lifted up the back end, walked it around, and blocked the

road. Finally, a black guy stopped and picked the lock. Sika gave him some money for helping. Sika told me the kid was probably thinking, "This is the first time I did something that is usually illegal and got paid for it, instead of being punished."

One night in upstate New York, SD Jones and I were wrestling Mr. Fuji and Mr. Saito. Saito was a shooter who used to invite people from the audience to get into the ring to wrestle. When they did, he would stretch them.

SD began the match against Saito. SD didn't know anything about shooting, so when he tagged out, he told me, "Saito's stiff tonight. Stiff!"

At that time, I had an ego as big as the Grand Canyon. I would work with you as long as you returned the favor. That's what Gene and Ole Anderson trained me to do. If you show me respect, I'll show you respect. On the other hand, if you disrespect me, I'll show you the same disrespect in return. All of the guys had that

attitude in those days.

I don't think Saito knew I had been an amateur wrestler. I believe he thought I was just a musclehead. When I locked up with him, he got stiff with me. I immediately stiffened up in response. He then tried to go for a couple of moves. I knew they weren't working moves. We got hot at each other and began shooting. When Fuji tagged in, I loosened right up and we went to work. Of course, I loved Fuji because he was one of the guys who trained me. There was no shooting with Fuji and me. Fuji worked. But as soon as Saito got back into the ring, things got stiff again. SD was worried. He could see what had been going on. When I tagged out, he said, "You stay on the apron and I'll finish the match."

When we got back to the dressing room, Saito and I had a few words. I told him, "Brother, don't be tryin' that stuff with me. I can take care of myself." He cursed me. Angelo Savoldi, who was the agent for Vince at the time, could sense there

was going to be a problem. When Saito shot in on me and went for my legs, Angelo immediately said, "Ah, boy. Here we go!" We only fought for a few seconds before the boys jumped in and separated us.

The next night, SD and I walked into the dressing room. Fuji always got to the towns early, so Saito was already sitting in the dressing room when we walked through the door. When I laid eyes on Saito, it was like my mother was standing beside me, whispering in my ear. "If you don't win a fight, you fight that man again the next day, and the day after that, until you beat him." I dropped my bag, pulled off my coat, shot across the room, and began to pound on him.

The identical scenario played itself out for the next two nights in a row. On the third night, we started out taunting each other. He said some bad things to me, I said some bad things to him. The straw that broke the camel's back was when I did something I saw Jerry Lewis do in one of his old

movies. I pulled back the corners of my eyes with my thumbs and made Japanese eyes, and then stuck out my upper teeth over my bottom lip. The next thing I knew, he had both arms around my legs and was taking me to the floor. He wanted me and I wanted him. I'm not proud of having made fun of his ethnicity, but he had been saying things to me about my race, including using the "N" word. The thing was, I had been called that so much it didn't bother me. He wasn't used to the ethnic insults, so it set him off.

After the fourth night, Arnold Skaaland made the two of us come into a room. He said, "I just got through talkin' to the old man," which is what he called Vince, Sr. He said, "If you guys fight one more time, you're fired. The old man says you can fight in the ring all you want, but don't fight in the dressing room. If you're gonna fight, do it in the ring where we can all make some money off of it." Then Skaaland said, "You have to shake hands right here in my presence." We did what he asked. I was the first to extend my hand. I don't

think Saito trusted me, and I don't blame him, because I kept attacking him whenever I saw him. Saito looked me in the eyes and finally began laughing. He held out his hand and said, "You crazy." He kept repeating that. "You crazy. I never fight you again. You crazy."

That's what stopped it, but I didn't want to let it go without an argument. I kept telling SD, "I wasn't raised to back down from a fight, especially a fight somebody else started."

SD said, "I don't care how you were raised. You're gonna be poor if you jump on Saito tonight!"

"I don't care. I'm gonna whip his ass tonight."

"Yeah, but tomorrow night, you're gonna be back home, and you ain't gonna whoop nobody in Roanoke."

Surprisingly, Saito and I became good friends. We were a lot alike because we were

both warriors. He was raised pretty much the same way I was, so fighting was no big thing to him. In the old days, most of the guys were raised that way. Saito and I fought each other, but we didn't hate each other. We each respected the other because neither one of us would back down and lose face.

One night in Pittsburgh, some of the players from the Steelers football team invited SD and me to a club. One of the regulars there kept bumping into me. When I sat down, he began mouthing off about how wrestling was fake. SD told me to ignore him. I ignored him for awhile, but he kept on until I finally stood up and picked him up. We were in the upper level VIP section. I walked over to the balcony and held him upside down over the side. It scared the daylights out of him. Everybody was pleading with me because they thought I was going to drop him. To be honest, I was angry enough to have done it. I'm glad I didn't, because if I had, I would probably be telling this story from prison.

Instead, I asked him, "Do you still think wrestling is fake?"

"No!"

"What? I didn't hear you."

"Nooooo!"

I finally pulled him back over the railing and set him on his feet. We were asked to leave immediately.

Word got around about the incident. The next time we went to Pittsburgh, some of the Steelers showed up, ready to get revenge on wrestlers … any wrestlers. The guy they picked was Bruno Sammartino. They got into a fight in the dressing room. Bruno and the Iron Sheik beat up five of those guys. The Sheik suplexed several of them on the hard, dressing room floor, and he was mad when he ran out of bodies to suplex.

I had a minor altercation in the dressing room one

night with King Kong Mosca. When I bent over to get something from my bag, he kicked me in the butt. I turned into him, backed him against the wall and said, "Do you see Mister Block there?"

After his eyes shifted to see the cement block wall, I continued. "If you ever do that again, I will spread your face all across it."

Then I turned and walked away. He never did it again.

One night, I was wrestling Blackjack Mulligan and Angelo Mosca in a tag team match at Starland Arena in Roanoke. I was in the ring selling. Mulligan told me, "Go home."

I said, "No, I can sell more."

He said, "Go home now."

I noticed an urgent tone in his voice. When I looked up, my mother, my brothers, Charles and Walter, and what looked like 50 other people,

were on their feet and inching towards the ring. I decided to take Mulligan's advice. I made my comeback, did the finish, and the crowd settled down.

I also had a squabble with Lars Anderson in Macon, Georgia. Lars liked to get a hold and hold you down for a long time. I mean, a long time. If you let him, he would get a headlock and hold it for 15 minutes. That was his idea of fun. What he thought he was doing was imitating Johnny Valentine, who was a master of ring psychology. Lars, however, wasn't even in the same league as Johnny Valentine. I was taught to work with the people in the audience, and I could tell the people were getting restless. I was muscular and rock hard at the time. I knew the people wouldn't believe Lars could hold me down for a long period of time. It just wasn't believable. Not only that, but Dory Funk, Jr. taught me how to wrestle, and how to fly. I didn't want to lay on the mat. How bad do you look when the people are cheering wildly for you when you go to

the ring, and then you lay on the mat for 15 minutes? I finally told Lars, "It's time for a comeback."

"No. Stay down," he said.

"Brother, we're losing the people."

"Shut up! Do you know who I am? You haven't been in this business long enough to tell me what to do."

Something snapped. I turned and hit him, and he fell right through the ropes. Ronnie West, the referee, said, "Tony, I think you knocked him out!"

"Well, you wake him up, and when you do, tell him that if we don't do some high spots, I'm going to knock him out again."

Ronnie didn't know what to do because we had to do the finish. You can adjust to some things that happen in the ring, but no matter what happens, you have to do the planned finish. I had to go out onto

the arena floor and literally pick him up and put him back into the ring. I held him in a chin lock while I tried to wake him up. When he finally regained his senses, he jerked away from me in a rage. We immediately did the finish and went home. When we got back to the dressing room, he began to yell at me. "Do you know who I am? I'll cut you! I'll cut your balls off!"

Ole was laughing. He got a kick out of it. He finally stepped between us and took me aside. "Tony, do me a favor. Just apologize and let's move on so we can do business."

I did what Ole told me to do. I apologized and moved on, but Lars knew I was the tougher man, which is all that was really important to me.

I saw Lars at a convention a while back. He walked up and shook hands with me. There was no animosity between us. What happened in the past was forgotten and we didn't hold anything against each other.

I heard a lot of stories about Karl Gotch, but other than my initial training, I didn't have any interaction with him until I went to Japan. Like always, even though I was in another country, the first thing I did early in the mornings was find a gym and do my workout. When I sat down with everybody at breakfast, Gotch began to pick on me: "There's one thing that all these guys with big arms have in common. They all have skinny necks."

He was, of course, insinuating that bodybuilders couldn't stand up against a submission wrestler. Gotch, a master of psychology when it came to getting under people's skin, droned on and on, trying to find my hot button. He found it pretty quickly, but in the back of my mind, I heard George Scott's voice: "Keep your mouth shut and do as you're told." I was still young in the business, so I knew better than to talk back to a veteran.

Khosrow Vaziri, the Iron Sheik, also was at the table that day. He said, "Mister Gotch. I went to the gym today with Mister US of A, Tony Atlas. I

don’t see him have a skinny neck. Look at the Sheik. Look at his neck. If you want to try somebody, Mister Gotch, you try your hand on the Sheik."

Karl Gotch didn’t say a word. That’s what I remember most about him. He didn’t want any part of the Iron Sheik. A lot of people don’t realize Iron Sheik was the 1971 AAU Greco-Roman wrestling champion in the 180½-pound class. He also was the assistant coach of two U.S. Olympic teams.

Sheik used to go to the training center and work out with me. One day, a guy came to the gym with an old issue of Strength and Health that featured a story on me training for a contest. The author of the article wrote that I had a 350 squat and a 480 bench press. Sheik really ragged on me when he read that. He thought it was hilarious that my bench press was higher than my squat. Ken Patera laughed out loud and said, "Hey, Tony! Don’t you know it’s supposed to be the other way

around?" Patera then told me about the time he wrestled Sheik when he weighed 170 pounds. "I couldn't move the guy, Tony. He only weighed 170 … and I couldn't move him!

When the Road Warriors first came into the business, they were very green, and they were careless with people. They would throw guys around without a thought to how anybody fell. They would hammer the crap out of people, and act as if every match was a shoot. Everybody was scared to death of them.

One night in St. Paul, Minnesota, I got into the ring and Hawk got a little stiff with me. I told him, "I'll work with you exactly the way you work with me." In the very next move we made, he elbowed me right in the mouth … so I punched him in his mouth. We locked up like two bulls and I took him down, rubbing his face into the mat. I stretched him a little bit, and then he tagged out. He was really mad. When Animal came in and asked me what was wrong, I said, "Nothing, as long as your

partner learns to work. If you get stiff with me, I'll get stiff with you. If you're loose with me, I'll be loose with you."

In Toronto, I was teaming with Ivan Putski against Bret Hart and Jim Neidhart. Jim and I both liked to work stiff, so when the bell rang for the match to start, we lit into each other like two mad bulls. When Bret tagged in a few minutes later, the first words out of his mouth were, "I'm a worker."

On one road trip, Tommy Rich was driving and I was sitting in the front passenger seat. Paul Orndorff and Brian Blair were in the back. For some reason, Paul was in a bad mood. Let me rephrase that. Paul was always in a bad mood. Earlier that day in Ohio, I had bought some barbeque ribs. Paul began to yell, "What is that stinkin' shit?"

I said, "That's my ribs."

"I don't wanna smellin' that shit all the way

home. I'm gonna throw it out the window."

"Well, if you throw them out, I'm gonna throw you out behind 'em."

That set it off. We went back and forth with the words. "If you think you can do that, then go ahead."

Finally, Paul said, "Pull this son-of-a-bitch over. We'll settle our beef on the side of the road."

Tommy said, "Come on, guys. We're not that far from the hotel. Let's get on home and have a few beers."

Paul insisted. "Pull this car over!"

As soon as my feet touched the pavement, Paul sucker-punched me. When he did, I hooked him and put him down. I didn't do anything else. I just held him down. He was on the ground and he couldn't move. Tommy said, "All right,

guys. Let's break it up. Let him go, Tony."

I didn't have any problem fighting Paul, but I liked Paul, and I still do, so I wanted to end our differences as easily as possible. I said, "I'm sorry if you're having a bad day, but what's your problem?"

He began to talk, so I let him up. When I released him, he jerked his head forward and bit through my earlobe. It's strange, but I don't remember him biting me. I assume it was the adrenalin pumping through my system. Tommy said, "Are you guys cool now?"

I began to relax and said, "Yeah, I'm cool."

Paul said, "I'm cool, too. I just wanted to let him know that I'm not afraid of him."

I said, "That's okay, brother."

We got back in the car. When I did, Tommy said, "Oh, my God! Tony, your ear's bleeding!" I never

knew Paul had bitten me. The only reason I went to the hospital was because the earlobe was hanging. Tommy said, "You don't wanna run around lookin' like that for the rest of your life, Tony. Let's go to the hospital and get it stitched up." The doctor only put in a few stitches and gave me a tetanus shot, but they kept me overnight because they said a human bite can be as dangerous as, or more dangerous, than animal bites because of the types of bacteria and viruses found in the human mouth.

The next morning, we all met to go to the town. When I asked him why he bit me, Paul said, "You took me down so fast and had me tied up in a knot. I didn't know what you were gonna do."

We shook hands and agreed we'd never speak of it again. A few years ago, I saw an interview with Paul Orndorff. He didn't go into detail, but he said he bit off my ear and sent me to the hospital. That's the true story. Tommy Rich will tell you the same thing, and if Paul will be honest

with himself, he knows it's the truth, too. It really wasn't that much of a fight. There were only three moves in the whole incident: a punch, a takedown, and a bite. He hit me, I took him down, and he bit me.

I never held any animosity towards Paul over the incident. I love Paul, so I don't mean any disrespect, but I knew I was the better man. I held him down because I wanted him to know I could beat him. I didn't want to hurt him. My attitude had always been that I wouldn't hurt you, as long as you understood I wasn't somebody you could play with. I held back on a lot of people because I don't have the killer instinct in me. I didn't get into weightlifting to convince people I was a badass. I did it so people would leave me alone. My mother made me fight every day. By the time I was 20 years old, I had been fighting almost every day of my life for 10 years, and I had had enough of it.

I wasn't the only wrestler who had scraps with

other wrestlers. Those things happened more times than you might think.

Georgia Championship Wrestling ran occasional shows on Sunday in Macon, Georgia. We normally ran on Tuesday nights, but for some reason, the town just wouldn't draw. On Sundays, however, the building was packed no matter what we had in there. On one card, Ole booked a match between The Great Mephisto [Frankie Cain] and Mr. Wrestling #2. Before the match began, Mephisto was swinging his rag around in the air and it accidentally hit Two in the eye. Two was hot and lit into Frankie. When they got back to the dressing room, they were both raising all kinds of hell and went at each other again. It took everybody in the dressing room to break the two of them apart. When things settled down, Ole said, "If you two get into it again, we're not gonna break it up."

They refused to settle down, so Ole locked them into the room next door to let them settle their

differences. The boys were hot because they wanted to see them go at it. We heard the two of them yelling at each other, and then there was a loud, "Bang! Bang! Bang!"

The door opened a few seconds later and Frankie walked out without a scratch on him. When Two came out, he was still wearing his mask, but you could tell he had taken a beating. Everybody felt sorry for Two, except for Ole, who said, "You see? You raised all that hell over a little flicker of a cloth. Now look at you!"

Ole was laughing and ragging on Two. Two didn't even get showered and dressed. He just grabbed his gear and left.

Rick Rude was one of the toughest guys I ever met. If you were ever in a bar fight, Ravishing Rick Rude was the guy you would want by your side. He could whip anyone. Any of the guys who came out of Minnesota would tell you that. He was one of the toughest men ever in professional

wrestling, but outside the ring, he was a true gentleman.

When I was wrestling in Oklahoma for Bill Watts, "Hacksaw" Jim Duggan and Matt Borne got into a major fight. Borne's girlfriend left him, claiming he had been beating her. A short time later, she began dating Hacksaw. Borne beat her up again. When Borne came into the dressing room that night, he walked right up to Hacksaw. Words were exchanged and they began to fight. Ernie Ladd, who worked for Watts, stepped between them to separate them. I thought I was watching the scene from The Wizard of Oz, where Dorothy threw the bucket of water on the witch. Ernie's knees gave out on him. They began to buckle and he slowly sank to the ground. As he went down, he was screaming, "Tony Atlas! Keep these two away from each other!"

Hacksaw grabbed Borne in a headlock and got ready to hook out his eye. I reached them just in the nick of time and grabbed his hand, holding it so

he couldn't pull out Borne's eye. Later, Grizzly Smith chewed out both Ernie and me for breaking up the fight. He said if Watts had been there, he would have fired us both for breaking it up. Bill loved that stuff, and would have let them fight out their differences.

When Bill Watts brought me into Louisiana in April 1979, Charlie Cook and I worked in New Orleans against Stan Hansen and Bruiser Brody. Dusty Rhodes, Thunderbolt Patterson, and Tank Patton were also there. I was booked there through Charlotte, Dusty was from Florida, and Thunderbolt and Tank were regulars in the territory.

One day, Watts booked two shows: one in the afternoon, and one in the evening. The first show sold out completely. Bolt walked in and shook my hand. I was about to pop a Dianabol [an anabolic steroid] when Tank roared into the door. He was buck naked. He began screaming, "I go into that ring and sell all that nigger shit and that nigger

won’t do anything for me! I should beat the shit out of that nigger!" Bolt didn’t say a word while Tank was yelling at him, but Tank finally went for him. I grabbed Thunderbolt and Dusty grabbed Tank. About that time, Watts came to the door and asked what the commotion was all about. Tank said, "I go to the ring and sell all his nigger shit all night, then he won’t sell for me, so I want to whip his ass!"

Watts said, "Let them go!"

Dusty began laughing because I wasn’t paying any attention to Thunderbolt. I was on the ground trying to pick up my Dianabol, which had fallen on the floor during the skirmish. Sure enough, when Watts gave them the go-ahead, they began fighting. Let me tell you: if you ever saw Thunderbolt hit someone, it would impress you. I thought he had a knife because he was cutting Tank with his fists. Every time he hit him, he cut him. I don’t know how he did that, but Tank looked like he did a blade job. When their fight took them into

the shower, Bolt wrestled Tank onto the ground. Bolt took his Bible out of his pocket, sat on Tank's chest, and read the Bible to him. Bolt was like that. He would do something, and then he would interject God into the situation. He would sit in the dressing room, smoke weed, and read the Bible. That's what nobody could understand. For a long time, I always wondered: if he was a born-again Christian, why did he smoke so much dope? He once told me he believed it was a natural herb created by God, so there was nothing wrong with it. The other drugs were bad. He smoked the healing herb.

The wrestling fans also found themselves in clashes with the wrestlers. Woe be unto any wrestling fan who asked Gene Anderson to help them get into the business. One guy kept bugging Gene Anderson about letting him try out to be a wrestler, so Gene finally told him to come to the Park Center on the following morning for a tryout. As I was leaving that night, Gene pulled me aside and said, "Be here at the Park Center at nine

in the morning."

When the guy got there, Gene told me to get into the ring and hurt him. I beat the guy with a hold that made him holler, but Gene didn't like the way I did the job. He wanted me to hurt the guy and do some serious injury to him. Gene got into the ring and hit the guy in the eye. When he did, the guy's eye popped out of its socket and blood poured out. That wasn't enough for Gene, though. He grabbed his wrist, bent it backwards, and broke it. The guy took off running, leaving his clothes behind. He didn't even take his car. He just ran down the street and disappeared. We put all of his stuff into the back seat of his car. Later that afternoon, I was in the office when he called, asking if it was okay for him to come to the Park Center to pick up his car and belongings.

Harley Race was involved in several incidents like that. He stretched one would-be wrestler for a few minutes, and then told him he was too old to get into wrestling. The guy didn't like that, so he

sucker-punched Harley and scooted out of the ring. Harley went out after him, caught him, and broke both of his arms.

If you got into it with a wrestler in those days, you had better make sure your insurance policy was up-to-date. Every one of those guys was as tough as nails. There was no such thing as a wimpy wrestler. Sure, there weren't many wrestlers in the league of Iron Sheik, Bob Backlund, or Andre the Giant, but almost all of them were tough.

Chapter 12
Racism in Wrestling

There's one question people ask me all the time, and they never get the answer they expect.

The question they ask is: Did you ever experience racism in wrestling?

Are you sitting down?

Okay. The only racism I ever experienced in my whole career … was from black people.

You heard me.

From black people!

People like Rocky Johnson, Thunderbolt Patterson, and Tiger Conway, Jr.

I'm sure this chapter will make me very unpopular with my black brothers, but it's the truth, and it's what I believe. You can agree or disagree, but my conclusions are based on what I've seen and heard as a black man for the past 56 years.

I'll talk about both black and white people who played a role in my life as we go along, but I want to preface it with my feelings on the subject of racism.

I've observed that black people always try to

make people feel guilty for what happened more than a century ago. They get so worked up over things like the Confederate flag. Oh, my goodness. They should just let those people alone. Let those good ol' southern boys" display that flag on their pickup trucks and in front of their house. Most of them will treat you to the best barbeque and the best fishing trip you've ever been on in your life. The only thing they ask for is a little dignity. I've got nothing against all those boys in Virginia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. I love those boys so much.

One of the things I've learned in life is people respond to you in like manner to the way you treat them. People don't have to believe the way I believe for me to like them. I like them simply because they're human beings. Whether we want to admit it or not, Americans are as one. When the shit hits the fan, we all stand together as one unit. The color of our skin, or what we believe, is all so insignificant. There are only two things Americans should concern themselves with, and

that's our country and God. We are godly people. We love right and we hate wrong.

The biggest crime here in America is black on black crime, and it's no different today than it was when the black people first came to America. When I went to South Africa, the only prejudiced people I found in South Africa were the black people. The blacks sent over to America were slaves before they got here. America didn't enslave the black people. They freed them. If the black people had remained in Africa, they would be slaves today. They wouldn't have freedom.

Historians don't talk much about John Quincy Adams because he wasn't black, but John Quincy Adams was one of the greatest civil rights workers who ever lived. Another great civil rights worker was John Brown. He started what could be called the 19th-century version of the civil rights movement, even though he chose violence as his method of accomplishing his ends. You don't hear much about either of them because they were white

guys. The media makes money out of controversy, and they can't stir up hatred with that, so they don't tell people that white people fought as hard, or harder, for the abolishment of slavery as the black people did. White Americans don't want to hear about slavery. They want to do something about it. That's a part of their history they're not proud of, and they're constantly trying to make it right.

Before I move along and get into my experience with blacks in wrestling, I want you to understand one thing. I don't think of myself as black. I don't think of myself as white. I'm an American. That's my focus. I'm for everything pro-American and against anything anti-American. I don't care if a person is white, black, yellow, brown, or polka-dotted. If you don't like America, I don't have any time for you.

Mr. Wrestling #2 and I were going to a town in Georgia in my big Lincoln Continental. As we drove through a rural town, we noticed a lot of the "rednecks" giving us the evil eye. I said, "Do you

want to have some fun? Ride in the back seat." I moved my seat all the way forward so he had a lot of leg room. The whole atmosphere of the communities changed. I would get out of the car and open the door for him. People would stop and stare, thinking he was someone important. When we rode together in the front seat, it created animosity, but as soon as he rode in the back, we were treated with nothing but respect. Some look at that as racism. I looked at it like learning how to work. Whether we were in the ring, or out of the ring, the working process never stopped. We had to get through the area safely, so I decided that while in Rome, I would do as the Romans do.

We had to adjust to each specific town, but I never took it personally. Bill Watts told me at one time, he was the most racial person in the business and he couldn't stand black people. But after he got to know Junkyard Dog and Ernie Ladd, he changed his attitude. By the time I met him, he had already mellowed out. He never called me the "N" word, but he used it on Ernie in the earlier days

when that was a common occurrence. The "N" word never bothered me, and racism only bothered me when it got physical. I heard the "N" word from the first day I walked into the business. Ole would call me a nigger, but five minutes later, he would give me advice and spend time trying to help me. I never took it personally. Guys like Skip Young wouldn't put up with it, but then again, Skip didn't make any money, either. People used to refer to Ole as "the dumb Polack." Harley Race constantly referred to Jim Barnett as "the fag." I used to address my bosses as "mister." One time, I said, "Hello, Mister Barnett." Then I said, 'Hi, Harley." Harley said, "If you're gonna call that old fag 'mister,' then you'd better call me 'mister,' too."

In professional wrestling, I never experienced what I would call racism from a white person. On the other hand, I only met one non-racist black, and that was Rufus R. Jones. Rufus was a top guy who was non-racial, and there is nobody in the business who can say anything bad about him. We used to

have Sundays off, except once a month when the Crocketts ran a show in the Greensboro Coliseum. Rufus always invited me to dinner at his house when we were off. He would take me shopping and talk to me. Remember, he was the person who talked me out of marrying Loretta Myers.

The black wrestlers were always trying to destroy each other, and there was a reason for why they acted the way they did. As I said earlier, at the time, each territory had room for only one black wrestler at the top. It didn't matter who that top black wrestler was. The other black wrestlers were always trying to knock him off the ladder. If you look at it, though, it really wasn't a racial thing because that happened with the white wrestlers, too. As a black wrestler, most of the white guys were my friends because we couldn't take each others' positions. When Ric Flair, Harley Race, and Dusty Rhodes held the world title, black and white wrestlers were both trying to knock them off. They had both groups aiming at them.

The only black wrestlers who openly stabbed me in the back were Tiger Conway, Jr. and Thunderbolt Patterson. Abdullah the Butcher treated me well because he was involved in my first big program. He knew if he helped me, he would help himself. Abdullah also was more active in Japan than he was in the United States, so he didn't feel his job was being threatened. He had his limitations on how far he would go to help somebody, but I understood his situation. If Abdullah brought Tony Atlas to Japan, Abdullah might have been out, so keeping me in Atlanta and out of Japan was a way of protecting himself. Let's say he helped me as much as he could without jeopardizing his own career, and you can't blame a person for that. More than likely, I would have done the same thing. I love Abdullah the Butcher like a brother and will always be grateful for what he did for me. I wrestled him many times in the Atlanta territory. He took me under his wing and we drew some pretty good houses. I have a lot of respect for him.

Tiger Conway, Jr. was racial when it came to white men, but he was more racial to blacks. He didn't like blacks. Rocky Johnson felt the same way. In fact, Rocky wanted to be considered anything but black. I believe the reason he didn't like being a tag team with me was because Vince, Sr. billed us as the first black tag team champions. That made Rocky mad. He couldn't stand the idea of someone referring to him as a black. He always wanted people to think he was from someplace like New Zealand. To me, though, I never thought he looked much like an Aborigine. Thunderbolt, on the other hand, wasn't particularly opposed to black people. He would have treated me the same if I had been white because he felt like people owed him. He was, however, very jealous of any new, black talent that came into Atlanta, which might, possibly, take his spot.

Thunderbolt experienced a lot of racism during the early days of his career. When he broke into the business, he had to stand by while Haystack

Calhoun passed out Ku Klux Klan flyers in the dressing room. I never experienced that kind of discrimination. Bolt wasn't handed his position, either. He had to fight for everything he got. I can almost understand his attitude. After he finally carved a niche for himself with the Atlanta promotion, they brought in a young, black kid named Tony Atlas and began to build everything around him. Bolt had gone through hell and high water to get to where he was, only to see me making the big money and replacing him as the number one draw.

Thunderbolt used to tell me the white man was against me. "The white man is gonna do this," "the white man is gonna do that," and even, "The white man is gonna lynch you." He had nothing but bad things to say about the white man, and yet, he was making $2,500 a week … from white people. At the same time that the white man was paying him big money, he was bad-mouthing them. He was so persistent that I finally started to believe him. It was like I had been brainwashed. One day, Ole

Anderson called. Ole had an idea for a money angle he wanted me to do. The plan called for me to do a job. I immediately thought about the things Thunderbolt had been saying and told Ole, "The only reason you want me to do a job is because I'm black. You didn't ask Tommy Rich to do it."

Ole said, "Tony, if we do it to Tommy Rich, we won't draw a dime because nobody cares what happens to Tommy Rich right now. They expect to see Tommy get beaten up, but they don't expect to see this guy beat up on you. You'll make us more money than Tommy ever could at this point. Even if that weren't true, I will agree with you. Yes, you're correct. If you weren't black, you wouldn't even be here. I have 1,001 white wrestlers. They're a dime a dozen. But I only have two niggers. The reason you're here making all this money is because you're black."

Like a lot of the people of that generation, when Ole talked about black people, he didn't always say black. He used the "N" word. I never took

offense to it. You almost had to laugh when he said it. I loved him to death, and I know he loved me. I'm not trying to justify it, or say it was right, but he didn't use the word because he didn't like black people. That's just the way people talked back then. Today, they would probably throw Ole in jail for that. He was lucky he was born when he was.

"Where are you getting all this shit from, anyway?" asked Ole.

"I just got through talkin' to Thunderbolt and he said ...."

Ole interrupted me and said, "Oh, my God. You don't need to say any more. Look, Thunderbolt is coming out here in about fifteen minutes. I want you to get out here to the office before he does." Then he hung up.

I left immediately and drove to the office, arriving about three minutes before Thunderbolt

did. Ole said, "Get in the back and don't make a sound."

I went to the back and he closed the curtain. When Thunderbolt came in, Ole got him involved in a conversation and casually brought up my name. Ole said, "I've got this great idea for you and Tony Atlas."

"What's that?"

"I'm thinking about making you two a tag team."

Thunderbolt said, "Well, that's one of the things I want to talk to you about. As long as you keep Tony Atlas here, I'm leaving."

That was my great, black brother. Thunderbolt said, "You need to get rid of Tony Atlas ..."

Ole interrupted and said, "I don't want to get rid of him. He needs the job and the money."

Bolt said, "Then beat him."

When I heard those words, I realized Thunderbolt's agenda wasn't as much about racism and blacks as it was about Thunderbolt. While Ole and Bolt finished their conversation, I sat back and thought about what I had heard. After Thunderbolt left, I came out. Ole said, "That's why these guys are tellin' you that stuff. They want to take your place, kid. Do you have anything else to say?"

"No." As I drove home, I thought about things. Thunderbolt wasn't trying to help me. Every day, he had been warning me about what the white man was going to do to me, and yet, all he wanted was for me to go in and screw myself so he could take my place. He knew if Ole gave me a push, I would be a threat to his position, so he was going to do whatever he could in order to protect his spot. And I thought he was my friend. Unbelievable, huh?

I didn't want to be like that. I thought, "You know, I have to start judging people on how they

treat me, not solely on the color of their skin."

I always assumed if a person was black, he was on my side when it came to dealing with the white folks, but I learned the trustworthiness of a person, both your friends and your enemies, had nothing to do with color. I give Thunderbolt a lot of credit for doing something for me that day.

He made me an American.

I began to realize what America was all about. It's the melting pot. People don't talk about America being a melting pot like they used to, but in this country, we can make friends from all races. We don't just have black friends, or just white friends, or just Japanese friends, or just Jewish friends. We have the opportunity to have friends of all races and nationalities. That's why the Mr. USA gimmick has worked so well for me. I understand the true meaning of what it is to be an American. You can have white, black, Japanese, and Jewish enemies, but you're also

going to have white, black, Japanese, and Jewish friends. You can't treat a person based on the color of their skin. You can only treat a person according to the way that person treats you. Johnny Heidemann, one of the old-timers, taught me that early in my career when one of the wrestlers was telling me something bad about somebody else. Johnny walked over and said, "Hey, Tony. How do you get along with the guy he was talking about?"

I said, "Well, we get along pretty good."

Johnny said, "Then that's how you should judge that man. As long as that man treats you right, then he should be all right with you."

Whenever I went to Houston, I flew in for the Friday night show and flew right back out. Paul Boesch had received a lot of letters from fans in Beaumont who wanted to see me wrestle, so one week, he convinced Jim Barnett to let me stay for two nights, instead of just one. After the show in

Houston, I told Paul I didn't have any transportation to Beaumont. Tiger Conway, Jr. spoke up and volunteered to take me. Nobody asked him to do that. He volunteered. I could had ridden with Gary Young, who I became good friends with when he was in Atlanta, but since Tiger generously offered to let me ride with him, I took him up on his offer.

Tiger took me back to the hotel and I checked in. Late the next morning, he picked me up and we went to the gym together. After we ate breakfast, he dropped me off at the hotel and told me the time he would pick me up. I didn't want to be late because I really respected Paul Boesch, so I was ready and waiting for Tiger more than 15 minutes before he was supposed to be there.

Fifteen minutes after our planned meeting time, I called his house. His mother said they had already left, so I assumed they were on their way to pick me up. Thirty minutes later, the desk clerk called my name and said I had a phone call. I just knew it

was Tiger, but instead, it was Gary Young, who was off that night. He had planned to leave a message, but when the desk clerk told him I was in the lobby, he asked to talk to me. "When you get back from Beaumont, I'll take you out honky-tonking." He knew I liked country-western music and he wanted to treat me to some barbeque ribs and a beer. We hadn't seen each other since he left Atlanta, so he was anxious to see me. He finally said, "What the hell are you still doin' at the hotel? I didn't expect to talk to you."

"Why not?"

"Well, if you're gonna leave for Beaumont, you should've left about an hour ago."

"I'm waitin' on Tiger. I called his mother and she said they were already gone."

"Tony ... they've gone to the show, man ... without you. If he ain't there by now, he ain't gonna show."

"No, man. Tiger wouldn't do nothin' like that."

"Tony, listen to me. They've gone to the show. What hotel are you at?"

I told him. He said, "Just wait in the lobby and I'll come right over to get you."

Gary Young picked me up and drove 120 mph to get me to the show on time. I was so scared, I was white when we pulled into Beaumont. When I stepped inside, Paul Boesch was standing beside the door. "Don't talk to me," he said. Just drop your bag and run to the ring." As I dropped my bag, I noticed Tiger and his father standing behind the curtain to the arena. We were scheduled to wrestle as a tag team against Gino Hernandez and Killer Tim Brooks. When he saw me, the look on his face wasn't one of happiness.

That night, I wrestled in what I wore to the arena: jeans, t-shirt, and cowboy boots. When I went to the back after the match, it was obvious Paul

Boesch wasn't interested in hearing my excuses. In fact, he was quite angry. "Tiger is not responsible to get you to your bookings. The only person responsible for you is you."

I didn't hold any ill will towards Paul, but I could have killed Tiger. It made me so mad that I went after Tiger. I grabbed the front of his shirt and slammed him against the lockers. When his father grabbed me, I pushed him off, and then began to bounce Junior's head on and off the locker. I was yelling, "Why didn't you show up? If you weren't gonna be there, why did you tell me you were?" The whole dressing room rushed in and pulled me off of him. At the time, I couldn't understand why he would tell me, "I'll pick you up tomorrow," then leave me at the hotel. I realize now that he was trying to get rid of me. He didn't want me there. What he didn't realize was that Paul Boesch booked me. I didn't have anything to do with where I went or what I did. The old-timers will all tell you, our job was to keep our mouths shut and do what we were told. If a

promoter wanted to use me more than somebody else, don't get mad at me for it.

Later on, when Paul handed me my payoff, I said, "If it wasn't for this man, Paul, I wouldn't be here. He deserves this payday." I turned right around and gave it to Gary Young. I didn't want the money. Gary said, "You don't have to do that, brother."

I said, "No. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have made it."

Gary Young will tell you the same story. That's why, when I tell about events that happened in my life, I mention names as often as possible. You can always call that person and say, "Tony Atlas told me this. Is that true?"

On the way home, Gary told me that before I came to Houston, Tiger was the top black guy in the territory, which was understandable since he was the only black wrestler in the territory. He

had been working on top, and when I came in, he was relegated to the number two position. Once again, when I say the only racism I ever experienced was from my fellow black wrestlers, it was because most territories only featured one black wrestler on top. Whenever I came into a territory, I got the big push, and the other black wrestlers were pushed down the card. That later happened to Skip Young in Texas, and Pez Whatley in Tennessee. Years later, I was told they resented me. Skip Young himself told me, "If it wasn't for you, Tony, I would have made a lot of money in this business. Every time Tony Atlas showed up, they forgot about me and focused on you."

I said earlier that Jim Barnett had reached a point where he wouldn't book me in Houston. I can't say for sure, but maybe because of this incident, Boesch wasn't too keen on using me, either. Still, when it came time for the Boesch retirement show in 1987, Vince, Sr. told me it was by special request of Paul I was being asked to appear. There

was no question, though, about who still was the most naïve guy in town.

After the show, Tiger apologized and said he would take me back to my hotel. You know the rest. He didn't show up. When Chief Jay Strongbow saw me standing outside, he said I could ride with him. Tiger later claimed he waited for me and that I never showed up.

"Fool me once, shame on you … fool me twice, shame on me."

What I couldn't understand was the people I did the most for were the ones who treated me the worst, and usually behind my back. In part, it was my own fault, because if I thought a person was my friend, I trusted them completely. When I look back at my peers, the guys who were in the main events, just about every one of them stuck it to me at one time or another. I have a lot of friends who worked down on the card, but I wasn't a threat to them. The people I should have been more careful

with were the guys on top.

On the other hand, from birth until today, most of the people who tried to help me were white.

Dick Murdoch was one of the best friends I ever had in this business. When Dickie came to Georgia, Ole and Gene told me to stay away from him because he didn't like blacks. It was common knowledge that he was a member of the Klan, so I think there was some truth to their statement, but based on my personal experience with Murdoch, he didn't hate black people. He was just of the opinion that the races shouldn't mix, particularly when it came to blacks and whites dating and marrying.

During one trip back to Charlotte, he told me why he joined the Klan. What he said made a lot of sense to me. It wasn't hatred. He was seriously concerned about the survival of the white race. In his opinion, a white baby could only be conceived by a white man and a white woman. If a black man

and a white woman had a baby, even if it was as white as snow, it was still a black baby. I know that's not politically correct, but if I was white, and I knew my family could no longer be white due to mixing, then I might have a problem with that, too. White people and black people aren't that much different when it comes to that. Whites like having white babies and blacks like having black babies.

The fact that Dickie didn't believe in mixing is okay. There are a lot of black people who don't believe in mixing the races, too, but they don't get ridiculed for it. Jesse Jackson and Louis Farrakhan are always bad-mouthing white people. They made millions of dollars doing it, and yet, if a white guy said half of the things Jackson and Farrakhan said, he would be labeled a bigot and a racist. Jackson even once notoriously referred to the Jews as hymies. A white guy could never get away with a statement like that. There is racism on both sides of the fence, but it seems like the only time racism is bad is when it comes from

white people. I don't know why things are that way, but I think it's a way for the black leaders to keep the animosity going and the money flowing into their coffers.

I respected Murdoch's beliefs. This is America, so he had the right to believe what he wanted to believe, as long as he didn't do anything to hurt anybody else. He never said anything bad about what blacks believed, so why should I comment on the things he believed in? I never had any animosity towards Murdoch. I just made sure he didn't know about it when I was with a white girl. His friendship was more important to me than a romp in the sack. We got along well over the years.

One day, he played a practical joke on me. After I won the Mr. USA contest, he handed me a piece of paper and said, "My friends want to meet you. You're going to be the guest of honor." On the paper was printed, "Knights of Columbus," and an address. I was so gullible. I should have

known Murdoch was setting me up. Signs that screamed "NO!" were flashing in front of me, but my curiosity got the better of me. A Confederate flag and a sign declaring the land to be private property was mounted on the front gate. On the front porch was … a hooded man in a white uniform! Murdoch had sent me to a meeting of the Klan. I turned my Lincoln around and sped back in the other direction. The guys in the dressing room teased me endlessly. "Didn't you read the paper? It was a KKK meeting!" Nobody could believe I fell for it.

Andre the Giant made it up for me, though. When Murdoch and I went to Japan, I lost my passport and had to get a replacement. When I got back on the bus, Andre said, "Tony! Sit with me." When Andre spoke, you did what he said. I sat beside him. Andre was drinking his wine. When Murdoch got on the bus, Andre said, "Hey, Murdoch! I heard you lost your passport. Now we have two dumb niggers on the bus!"

To be called a nigger was the one thing Murdoch couldn't stand. What I didn't know was that Murdoch had been calling me a "dumb nigger" behind my back.

Murdoch sat in the front of the bus and Andre and I were in the back. When we reached our destination and everyone stood up and began walking out, I noticed Murdoch wasn't moving. I figured he wanted to fight Andre, but when Andre got off the bus, Murdoch didn't move. When I began to walk past Murdoch, he stuck his hand in front of me. I thought, "Uh-oh."

Murdoch said, "Hey, Tony. Can you help me get my passport and let me know where you got yours?"

It was as if nothing had been said. He forgot about the incident as quickly as it had happened.

One night, after telling me how blacks and white shouldn't mix, Murdoch got drunk and asked, "Hey,

Tony. Can you get me some of that blackberry tonight?" He was, of course, referring to a black woman. Quite a few of the white guys who claimed they didn't like blacks had approached me with the same question in the past. For several weeks after that night, Murdoch would occasionally ask, "You haven't told anyone, have you?"

I said, "That's between you and me. I promise to keep it between the two of us."

That's the one thing I knew about Murdoch that very few other people knew. He laid a black woman. He would probably turn over in his grave if he knew I'm putting this story in the book. This is the first time I've ever told anyone. I got him a girl named Mickie and she serviced him. I would always call Mickie when I wanted one of the guys taken care of. She didn't care who it was. One time, I asked her to service one of the other black wrestlers. Later that night, she told me he said he wanted to "tie her up and make her scream so

everybody in the state of Georgia could hear her." Mickie said they began drinking, he told her how great he was, and then he fell asleep!

People can say what they like about Murdoch's racist beliefs, but when it came right down to it, we became good friends. At first, I avoided him, but once we met, he took good care of me and always treated me like a gentleman. He didn't believe in mixing, and I didn't fool around with white girls (at least not openly), so we got along, but he had nothing against black people. He would have been the first to tell you he made a lot of money working with blacks. He made me a lot of money when I worked with him. He even rode around with me. In fact, when Dickie rode with me, I never paid for anything. The first time we rode together was when he got stuck in Norfolk. I was a bit apprehensive, but I offered to take him home. During the course of our conversation, I casually mentioned that I liked pickled pigs feet. The next night, he bought me a big jar of them. Another time, he asked, "What kind of beer

do you drink?"

"I like Budweiser." I answered. When he picked me up the next afternoon, he had a 12-pack on the seat for me.

That was the real Dickie Murdoch. I have nothing bad to say about him, and I had a lot of respect for him. For all I know, I might have been the only black person he ever treated decently, but one is better than none.

I remember a funny story about Blackjack Mulligan and the Klan. In 1977, Mulligan asked me if I would like to go on a boat ride in Norfolk. "The guy who owns the boat is a friend who wants to show you a good time. He's an officer of the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan."

I laughed and then asked, "What does he want to do … drown me?"

"No, he just likes ya."

I told Blackjack I was afraid of boats, but that was just an excuse to get out of the invitation. I had a lot of white friends and I had no reason to distrust any of them, but I wasn't about to go on a boat ride with an officer of the KKK! That's an illustration of the contacts a lot of the wrestlers had, but I didn't mind their affiliation with groups like the Klan. The guys were good to me and never caused me any problem, and that was the bottom line.

If you were reading this book, and I went on and on about how white people are this, and white people are that, after awhile, you're going to say, "I don't want to read this stuff." The same thing goes for the promoters I worked for. If I said Vince McMahon, Jr. did this to me, and Vince McMahon, Jr. did that to me, and the only reason I didn't make it is because I'm black, and blame all my failure on racism, you would think, "Man, this guy doesn't take responsibility for anything."

I can't blame everything bad that happened to me

on society or my race. I can come up with 101 excuses for why Tony Atlas failed, but none of them are the truth. Tony Atlas was the only person responsible for Tony Atlas' failures. Just about everybody tried to help Tony Atlas. Tony Atlas just wouldn't allow himself to be helped.

I was lucky to get into the wrestling business at the beginning of what I call the pretty boy era: Ric Flair, Ricky Steamboat, Tommy Rich, and, of course, Tony Atlas. I know that because one night after a match, one of the boys told me, "Tony, you're the best-looking black wrestler we have!"

For a few seconds, I was feeling pretty good, until the guy I was with told me, "Think about it, Tony. You're the only black wrestler we have!"

When I told Skip Young the story, he saw something different. He said, "I don't see why you like that story. They're saying you can never be better than a white man."

The truth be told, there was a lot of that thinking on both sides of the aisle, black and white, but I didn't pay any attention to that kind of thing. Skip did, though. He should have just ignored it.

Early in my career, when I would walk into the dressing room, Swede Hanson would yell, "Hey, nigger!" When I did something stupid, Ole Anderson would say, "You dumb nigger!" I never paid any attention to it. I heard that word all the time, but I felt like it was just silly talk. I didn't mind being called nigger as long as they didn't pay me nigger money. The guys like Dick Murdoch, who said they hated black people, and used the "N" word in every other sentence were the guys who went out of their way to help me. People have a right to believe that people who use the "N" word are racist, but a black person can still get along with them. We might not become close friends or neighbors, but we can still co-exist and work together.

I guess I'm trying to make the point that I heard a

lot about racism, and the guys who were supposed to be racist, but I just didn't see it in action. In my opinion, for the most part, it was all just talk. I'm not saying racism wasn't around, but I didn't experience it personally.

I met other black wrestlers in the various territories. In Atlanta, I met the Magnificent Zulu [Ron Pope]. He was anything but magnificent. Zulu was a big man with a muscular body, but he couldn't work a lick. Even knowing that Zulu was a terrible worker, Ole brought him in. He just knew he could make money with Zulu. All he wanted Zulu to do was hit his opponent and cover him: one, two, three. Unfortunately, Zulu couldn't even do that without screwing things up.

One night, Tommy Rich and I were staying at the Passport Inn in Jonesboro, Georgia. When we came back from a show, I noticed my stereo system was gone from my room. I asked the lady at the front desk if she had seen anybody going into my

room. She said, "Your friend asked to be let in because he had left something in there."

"Who was it?"

"The tall, black wrestler."

It had to be Zulu because he was the only other black wrestler in the territory. When we returned to my car, my hubcaps were gone! At the time, custom hubcaps for a 1977 Lincoln Town Car cost $70 apiece. Zulu owned a Lincoln just like mine, but I'm sure it was just a coincidence when I saw him driving around town a few days later with custom hubcaps on his car which matched those that had been on mine. When I went into the lobby, the lady who ran the hotel said, "I saw him takin' them off. I knew you guys were wrestlers, so I figured you were friends, and I didn't think anything about." Before I had an opportunity to confront Zulu, Ole fired him. Zulu left the territory and I never saw him again.

Zulu was a coward, as well. One day, Thunderbolt, Zulu, and some other guys were boycotting wrestling. They were walking around the Atlanta City Auditorium with signs, protesting the fact that they had been fired. Zulu decided to go to the wrestling office and confront Ole personally. Ole was somebody to be afraid of in his heyday. He was pretty salty. Gene Anderson was the quiet one of the two, but he was more dangerous than Ole. In fact, Gene was somebody to be deathly afraid of. If somebody said wrestling was fake, Gene would say, "Come outside. I want to show you something." He would get them outside and beat the hell out of them, and then calmly walk back into the building. I saw Gene do that several times. When Zulu walked into the office, Ole stood up. That's all he did. He stood up. Zulu dropped his sign, turned around and ran away.

SD Jones was a very good friend. In contrast to other black wrestlers, who felt threatened by the presence of another black wrestler in the territory,

he jeopardized his own job when he helped me. I was paying $50 a night for a room at a hotel. SD said, "You're throwin' your money around by stayin' here. Why don't you come stay at my house?"

I had heat with the office [WWF] at the time. When they heard SD was letting me live with him, they told him to cut me loose or he would be looking for a job. SD said, "You can stay as long as you want, brother. They're just gonna have to fire me."

I didn't want SD to lose his job. I said, "SD, I'll just move out."

Luckily for me, SD had a cousin who was called Bigfoot, and he arranged things for me to stay with him. SD was then able to tell the office that I had moved out. The point of the story is that he was willing to give up his job to protect me.

I stayed in touch with SD and we talked almost

every week until he died October 26, 2008. If he had lived another 50 years, I never would have been able to repay him for the things he did for me.

I've spent a lot of time talking about the black wrestlers who caused me trouble and tried to stab me in the back. However, I have yet to tell the story about the black wrestler who I consider to be my worst enemy. He caused me a great deal of trouble, but that story will have to wait for a later chapter.

Chapter 13
Tennis Shoes

I had been making a lot of money and I had several un-cashed checks in my wallet. As a rule, we were paid in cash at the spot shows, but the office wrote us a check every three weeks for the big shows. I was able to live off of the cash I was paid. SD asked me, "What are you going to do

with those checks?"

"I'm going to mail them to Lori. She'll put them in the bank for me."

SD's wife said, "Tony, there's a bank right down the street. Why don't you let me take you there and open up an account?"

I seriously considered doing that, but Lori would hit the roof if I didn't send the money to her. I wasn't going to risk losing the combination of Lori and her shoes for anything. People who don't have a foot fetish will never be able to understand the power that shoes have over somebody like me.

The boys laugh at a lot of the books written by their peers because everybody writes about how tough they were, or what great workers they were. They don't reveal their weaknesses, mishaps, stumbles, and falls. I'm not ashamed to talk about those things.

I had (have) a strong foot fetish. Actually, I'm not

into bare feet. It's more of a shoe fetish (tennis shoes, in particular), but feet have to be in the shoes, so I call it a foot fetish.

When I told some of my friends that I was going to write a book, they said, "You had better tell Scott Teal about your foot fetish. If you don't, nobody will think you really talked to him."

I'm probably the first wrestler to get this personal in their book, but I never hid my fetish. My foot fetish controlled my life. Before he died, Arnold Skaaland told everybody about how I used to bring girls into the dressing room and have them walk on me. If you talk to anybody who knows me, they'll tell you about it. The wrestlers all saw me get walked on in the dressing rooms. They used to call me a "foot slave." Bill Eadie can testify to hearing Dusty Rhodes (who had a titty and butt fetish) tell me, "Tony Atlas has it made. He will never catch AIDS from having girls walking on him. Tony can get away with things I can't, too. He can grab any girl by the foot and get away

with it, but I can't grab a girl on the ass. And Tony can get his cookies anywhere. I need a hotel room."

When I was at the arenas, I would go underneath the bleachers. When I saw a girl with a pair of shoes I really liked, I would stick my hand under her foot when she stood up to cheer. The promoters all knew what I was doing. If they were looking for me, the guys would say, "He's under the bleachers."

"Under the bleachers? What's he doing under the bleachers?"

"He's trying to get his hand stepped on."

The Barbarian still talks about the time when we were working for WCW. We were 35,000 feet in the air in an airplane and I had a girl walk on me in the middle of the aisle. I had several stewardesses walk on me during flights. I would take off my shirt, lay on the floor, and let them walk. I have

pictures of me getting walked on in hotel lobbies, in gyms, and even at the Tony Awards. Tom Bradley always wanted me to do it in a restaurant. The boys loved it.

Many times, when Arnold Skaaland would come to pay me, I would be on the floor with a woman walking all over me. I would sign the paper and he would hand me the money … while the girl continued to walk on me. Oh, the fun we had!

I think Junkyard Dog had a dream of being a pimp. "If I could just find some girls to walk on you, I could take all your money!" It's a good thing the boys were my friends because they could have done just that.

If I had a choice of getting walked on or appearing at Madison Square Garden, I would have been in the hotel getting walked on. It's a weakness! That's why I walked out on the WWF the first time. I wanted to have a girl walk on me. When you have a fetish, it's stronger than

anything. It's stronger than drugs.

It's hard for anybody to understand, but shoes are my Achilles heel. I never minded letting the boys know because I wasn't the only freak in the business. There were a lot of freaks in the dressing room. We were all open about our fetishes. There were no secrets. It was something we all laughed about, and teased each other about.

You could write a book about the fetishes the wrestlers had. One of the guys got off by throwing popcorn on the floor and masturbating while girls walked on it. Another guy would dump bugs on a glass coffee table and whack off while he watched girls mash them with their feet. I can't say for sure that it was a sexual thing, but the Freebirds liked to pee on each other. They were into golden showers! Johnny Valentine liked to be beaten. I'm convinced he was a pain freak. If you hit Johnny hard in the chest during a match, he would get a boner. He was what people call a sado-masochist. The boys all knew it. He would get

mad if you didn't lay in your punches. He had a punch he used to throw to the ribs. Oh, my God. They weren't working punches in any sense of the word.

Wrestling was the perfect business for me. Compared to them, I was normal!

Fetishes were very prevalent in the business. In fact, if you didn't have a weird fetish, it probably wasn't the business for you. That's probably one of the reasons why the guys hated Ole Anderson. When it came to sex, he was too normal. Compared to everybody else, he was an average Joe.

There were a lot of voyeurs in the business, too. When I first got into the business, I had a strong suspicion that the guys were all gay because they talked so much about each other's penises. I wasn't used to that. When I was growing up, we talked about the female anatomy. We didn't want to even think about the guy parts, much less talk

about them. But when one of the guys got a boner, they would walk around the dressing room and show it off to everybody. They liked to watch guys who had a big one, like Tommy Rich, getting it on with one of the girls. I'm not telling tales out of school. The guys can't mention the name Tommy Rich without talking about his penis.

Mario Savoldi's brother, Tommy, walked into the dressing room one night with his head down. He looked like he was really discouraged about something. When somebody asked him what was wrong, he said, "Tony Atlas has a penis as big as my arm, and all he wants is for girls to walk on him. I have one the size of my pinky and I want to screw everything in sight!"

One day, when we were in Pittsburgh, one of the girls drove all the way from Columbus, Ohio, to walk on me. She liked walking on me as much as I liked being walked on. She got into being the dominatrix, being in charge. Forgetting I liked shoes with rubber soles, she had bought a new

style of shoes called granny boots, and she was wearing them when she showed up. I didn't like them. They reminded me too much of my grandmother. The week before, she had worn a pair of slip-on tennis shoes I really liked. Tennis shoes with no strings were my favorite kind of shoe. I told her I didn't want anything to do with her. She went crying to SD and told him, "Tony doesn't want me to walk on him tonight."

SD came to me and said, "That girl drove all the way from Columbus, Ohio, to be with you."

I told SD, "She's wearing boy's shoes." I considered tennis shoes with shoestrings to be boy's shoes. SD found another girl, who was wearing size 10 slip-on tennis shoes, and got her to trade shoes with my girlfriend, who wore a size 9. They stuffed the toes of the shoes with napkins from the hotel bar so they wouldn't slip on her feet. She came upstairs to my room and made me a happy man. When we were through, I went to the room of the woman who loaned us the shoes and

gave her $50.

I got walked on by all kinds of women. I didn't care what they looked like. My only concern was that they had big feet and the right type of shoes. I didn't always have sex with them, either. Since they were the mistress, or dominant, I didn't push myself on them. A lot of the guys hung around me because I didn't have sex with the women unless the women really wanted to. They knew that when the girls finished walking on me, they might have a shot at them.

When I was still in Georgia, a woman approached me one day and asked if I was still paying $50 to get walked on. Somebody had told her I used to pay women $50 just to walk on me. There wasn't any sex. They just walked on me. Not too long ago, a lady came up to me and said, "Tony, you used to pay my rent."

I said, "When did I do that?"

She said, "You used to give girls fifty dollars to walk on you for five minutes."

When I lived with Lori in LA, I gave her $1,000 a week, and all I asked was that she walk on me. A friend of mine used to say, "Vince isn't as smart as he thinks he is. If he paid attention to your foot fetish, he could have paid a girl five hundred dollars a week to follow you around and walk on you, rather than paying you as much as he is."

Everybody thought I spent my money on drugs, but that wasn't the case. I never spent a cent on drugs. I never had to. Everybody always gave them to me. It was my foot fetish that took all my money. Any wrestler who worked in my era can tell you that. I used to wine and dine girls to get them to walk on me.

I was sitting next to a professional-looking lady on an airplane one day. When I checked out her feet, I noticed she was wearing rubber-soled loafers. As we talked, I kept glancing down at her

feet, until I finally felt comfortable bringing up the subject. I told her everything about my shoe fetish. When I got around to asking her what she did for a living, she grinned and said, "I'm a psychiatrist."

"Oh, no," was all I could think to say.

She laughed and began asking questions about my childhood. Her conclusion was it all stemmed from the time when I was a toddler. When my mother went to work, women from the neighborhood would stay with my grandmother. I would wrap myself around their ankles and fall asleep, and usually, their feet would end up on top of me. I would also play with the feet of other kids' mothers. Those black women were controlling and domineering. I never played with my mother's or grandmother's feet, or anybody else who was related to me. If you were non-related, your feet were in trouble. To be more specific, they were in trouble if they were attached to a female. The psychiatrist said that was where

it all began. Shoes and feet were my security blanket. I had the need to be dominated by feet.

Later, when I was in elementary school, I would challenge the stronger girls to climb trees. I would climb up behind them and occasionally "help" by holding one of their feet. The girls all wore tennis shoes back then, and that's where my shoe weakness lies. There are other guys like Hacksaw Duggan who have a fetish for high heels. I met another guy who was into sandals. My Kryptonite was slip-on tennis shoes, or slip-ons with rubber soles, but they had to look like women's shoes. If a woman was wearing Reeboks or Nikes, it had no effect. They looked like boy's shoes. But females in slip-on loafers or tennis shoes would make me lose my marbles. Whatever that woman asked me to do, I did.

When I was about 11 years old, my mother went outside to look for me. She saw a little girl walking back and forth behind the bushes. When she looked down at the ground, she saw my feet

sticking out. Her first thought was that I was laying on the ground, looking up under the girl's dress. In those days, girls didn't wear pants. They wore dresses. My mother marched over and shouted at the girl, "Get off of that boy!" Then she asked me, "What are you doing?"

"Nothin', mama. She's just walkin' on me."

"Why is she walkin' on ya? Are you looking under her dress?"

"No, m'am. I had my eyes closed."

The little girl said, "He didn't look under my dress. He promised me he would keep his eyes closed."

Mother asked, "Why is he under you for?"

The little girl said, "He likes it."

Mother asked me, "Do you like feet?"

"Yes, m'am."

Her mouth dropped open and she turned around and marched back home. That night, she made me and my brothers all sit down in the living room. She looked directly at me and said, "Okay. You like feet. Do you like boys' feet or girls' feet?"

When I said girls' feet, she said, "Okay. Son, you boys have grown up a little bit. Whenever you do anything like that, do it behind closed doors. Do not do it in the fields." Then she added, "And only do it with females."

As she walked off, I heard her mutter under her breath, "I've seen a lot of strange things in my time."

I didn't have a father to tell me about the birds and the bees, so I think that was her way of giving me "the talk" that all kids get from their parents. As soon as Mother left, my other brothers

turned and looked at me. Walter asked, "What the hell's goin' on?" They didn't have a clue of what Mama had been talking about.

Chapter 14
That Thing

When I went to California in 1980, I did commercials for a hamburger chain called Carl's Jr. I also did some bodyguard work for a couple of celebrities. There were countless ways to make a buck in southern California, so I was able to make a good living.

The worst thing that happened while I was there was Lori got me hooked on cocaine. That stuff was so readily available. One night, I walked into the duplex where we were living and asked Lori's mother, "Where's Lori?"

"Oh, she's in the back with a couple of friends."

I didn't think about it at the time, but Lori never had a female friend. Her friends were always males. At the time, however, I strolled to the back thinking, "Hey, a couple of chicks, ba-ba-ba-boom."

When I walked into the room, a group of guys were sitting on the sofa with Lori … and the room smelled of sex. Hello? I had been around the block a few times. I should have known right then and there what I was dealing with. My mother had warned me about her when I first took Lori to meet her. My mother looked at her walking up the sidewalk and said, "Don't bring "that" into my house."

That had been my mother's first sight of Lori, and her intuition told her something I should have known for myself. My mother liked my first wife, Joyce, because she knew Joyce was a clean, decent girl. She hated Lori, though, and knew she would lead me down a path of destruction. Mothers seem to have a sixth sense

about those things. Whenever she talked about Lori, she never referred to her by name. She always called her "that thing." Even when Lori was present, my mother would point to her and refer to her as "that." "You need to get away from that thing. She is going to destroy your life." There's an old saying that goes "momma knows best," and in that case, she really did.

Lori was a total slut. She didn't know what underwear was. I guess I always knew that, but that's the kind of girl the wrestlers used to chase back then. We could party with that kind of a girl, and partying is one of the things we lived for. The first time I met her, she performed oral sex on me and another wrestler, one right after the other.

Lori had been attending college in LA, but when she developed a cocaine problem, her mother sent her to live with relatives in Georgia. She didn't think her mother knew about her drug use, but she did. We don't give mothers enough credit. They often know more than we think they do.

My problem was I was weak for women. I didn't want to just have sex with them. I always fell in love and wanted to marry them. I asked Lori several times to marry me, but she wouldn't do it. I remember Rene Goulet talking about one of the girls the boys liked to share. "Don't let Tony get around that girl."

"Why?"

"Because he'll marry her. These girls screw all the boys, and then Tony marries them."

I was always torn between two worlds: that of my mother, who always said a man should be married before living with a woman, and that of the wrestlers, who looked at every woman as fair game. Rene warned me about Lori, too. "Don't marry her, Tony. She screwed all the boys." That's why girls like Lori came to the matches. They wanted to get laid by a wrestler. Correction: they wanted to get laid by wrestlers, plural. They didn't want to do just Tony

Atlas. They wanted to do all the boys.

On the night in Los Angeles when I walked into the room and found the men with Lori, I ignored the warning signs. One of them said, "Do you want some of this?"

He held up a packet of white powder, which I knew was cocaine because I had seen it around a lot. I didn't want to do it, but I did it, anyway. When I first met Lori, she walked on me in the gym. From that day on, I was hers to do with as she wished. She was what we call a dominatrix, or a woman who takes the dominant role in bondage and discipline in sexual practices. They are often in control of their relationships even outside the bedroom. There are different kinds of dominatrices, too. Some use a whip, or the cat o' nine tails. The only thing my dominatrices needed to control me was tennis shoes. When Lori told me to take a snort, she was in her dominatrix character. I couldn't resist. I said, "Yeah, give me some of that." I took my first

hit that night. Lori thought I had been doing it all along, so she gave me more and more. In a short period of time, I was hooked. I was so messed up that I didn't know whether I was coming or going. That was when things began to disappear. When you get into the world of drugs, sex, and rock-and-roll, that's all you think about. Lori and I had people going in and out of our apartment, and we really didn't know half of them.

After that, things began to fall apart rather quickly. At the time, I was still very religious about going to the gym. I would go to the gym in the morning, do my workout, return home and relax, hang out on the beach, go back to the gym at night, and return home to party with Lori. I was strung out on coke most of the time, but I knew enough to realize I was in real trouble. After Lori and I had been together for four years, I told myself, "Tony, you have to get away from her for awhile."

In March 1982, I went to Japan, and stopped in Hawaii during my return to the States. The boys usually wrestled for Lia Maivia in Honolulu during their layover. I remember doing a show. When we pulled up to the arena, we saw a big group of Samoans and Hawaiians blocking the entrance doors. They weren't going to let us in until the promoters put them on the show. SD and I sat on the steps and waited. We weren't going to fight those guys. The smallest guy probably weighed 350 pounds. One of them told SD, "Brother, you guys have the whole world. This is all we've got. We can't let you guys just come in and take this from us."

When we got back to the States, we were going to stay in Los Angeles and work for Mike LeBell. Lori and I wanted to party for a few days, so I bought her some new shoes. I spent $100 on cocaine, and then bought a bag of weed and a case of beer. My plans were to party on Monday and Tuesday, and then slow down on Wednesday through Friday so I could get ready for my match

on Saturday.

When I left Japan, I put $2,000 of my payoff into my wallet. When I reached into my jacket to get my wallet to buy the dope, my girlfriend told me to keep my money low because she was nervous about somebody seeing me buy it. When we got back to the hotel, I left the car with the valet, a young, Mexican kid. As soon as I walked into our hotel room, I remembered that I had left my wallet in the car. I got on the elevator and ran out to the valet parking lot. My car was there, but my wallet, which contained $2,000, and the Mexican, were gone. I still had $3,000, but a chunk of that was needed to pay for the hotel. We were staying at the Beverly Hillcrest, so the rooms weren't cheap.

The loss of the money didn't really bother me. I figured I would have blown it on drugs, anyway. At the end of the week, I was telling the story to the boys in the dressing room. They told me the guy probably passed the money around to all of his friends at the hotel.

When I got back to New York after the tour, SD said, "I heard you lost ten thousand dollars!"

In just two weeks, through the grapevine, the amount of money I lost had appreciated by $8,000. Several years later, somebody told me they had heard it was $20,000. Sputnik Monroe used to say, "If a story is worth telling, it's worth embellishing." That's the way it was in the wrestling business. Stories take on a life of their own, and like a fine wine, they get better with time.

By mid-1982, I was really messed up. In addition to being stoned on drugs, I was horny. Lori, who was still in Los Angeles, called and begged me to come see her. "I have a new pair of shoes that I think you'll like, Tony."

Lori knew what it took to break down my defenses. She would tell me about her shoes and say things like, "I want to walk all over your body." She did that every time I called until she had me so worked up that I would just pack up and

leave. I should have left well enough alone and told her I had to be in Philadelphia that night [July 31, 1982], but instead, I made the mistake of saying, "Tell me about them."

When I got up the next morning to leave for Philadelphia, I realized I had locked my keys in my car. Most of the wrestlers had already left, so I thought I had the perfect excuse to skip the show and go see those shoes. As I turned from my car to go back to my hotel room, Chief Jay Strongbow was standing a few feet away. When I told him about the situation, he said, "Tony, you can ride to Philly with me. After the show, we'll get a locksmith to unlock your car."

I said, "No. Screw the car. I'm goin' to LA." I went to the airport and bought a ticket for Los Angeles, with nothing on my mind other than partying with Lori and getting walked on.

What I didn't know at the time was that Vince had big plans for me. He was going to put the WWF

tag team belts on SD Jones and me. We were going to beat the current champions, Mr. Fuji and Mr. Saito. I had already worked an angle where they juiced me on TV, but at the time, I didn't know the details of where the program was headed. Later on in the show, I came out with bandages around my head and did the old 1776 gimmick, clearing the ring of the two hated Japanese wrestlers.

That wasn't the first time I skipped a booking because of my horniness. Anytime I wanted to spend a night with a girl, I would call the office and make an excuse. As far as I know, Vince, Sr. never fired anybody who didn't deserve it. In fact, just about everybody in the business who has been fired, at one time or another, deserved it. And if they were honest with themselves, they probably should have been fired sooner than they were!

I don't know if or not this story is true or not, but the way I heard it, Captain Lou Albano got fired one night at Madison Square Garden. There was

an area of seating marked off for important people: doctors, lawyers, senators, friends of the office, etc. Mrs. McMahon, Juanita, was sitting there with several of her friends. Captain Lou showed up at the arena in an inebriated state. He walked out in front of Mrs. McMahon, pulled down his pants, and mooned her. Vince, Sr. got so mad that he fired him. At the time, Bruno was the WWWF champion. He refused to wrestle until they re-hired Captain Lou. Vince, Sr. had to send somebody to the Ramada Inn to ask Lou to come back.

Chapter 15
Tag Team Champions

When I skipped out on my bookings and left for Los Angeles, I stayed there for almost 10 months. The only reason I called Vince, Sr. was because I ran out of money. The first words out of my mouth were, "I'm ready to come back, Mister

McMahon."

"Where in the hell have you been, Tony? We've been looking everywhere for you. Nobody knew what happened to you."

"I'm in Los Angeles."

"What in the hell are you doing there?" he asked.

"Well, it's a long story"

I told him the truth. I told him about my urges. He just laughed and said, "You could have stayed here and got one of the rats to do that."

"I know, but I'm ready to come back to work if you'll have me," I said.

"Do you have any money?"

"No, sir."

Vince hollered to his wife, Juanita, "Honey, do

you have any cash?"

"I have about eight hundred dollars," she said.

He said, "I have two hundred. Take it all down to Western Union and wire it to Tony Atlas."

He didn't fuss at me or give me a lecture, even though that was exactly what he should have done because, in hindsight, I didn't learn anything from the experience. From that point on, I thought I could take off anytime I wanted.

As I said earlier, I was a jock, and I needed a coach to keep me in line. I followed orders very well. I wasn't a leader. The best way to handle me was to stay on my ass. I wasn't the type of person who did well on his own. I had to have a boss. Luckily, as a child, I was raised by a domineering woman. There's no telling where I would be today if that hadn't been the case. When I was wrestling in Georgia, I was blessed to have Ole, because he would be on my ass about the

smallest thing. A lot of people didn't like Ole for that very reason, but to me, he was the best thing to ever happen to me. Whatever he had to tell me was constructive criticism. I never worried about screwing up when Ole was around.

As an example of how lazy I am, somebody gave me a computer a few years ago. It's still in the box. I've always been lazy. I didn't start walking until I was two. Isn't that something? Even as a youngster, I was too lazy to walk. I'm the type of person who has to be pushed. If you get behind me and crack the whip, I do wonderful, but if you leave me on my own, forget it. That's why I did a good job for Ole. Ole stood behind me, put his foot in my butt, and made me do what I was supposed to do.

When I was in Charlotte, George Scott kept me in line. He called me into the office many times, and he would tell me, "Tony, you have to remember: when you're in a club, gym, or hotel, you're not representing Tony Atlas. You're representing the

wrestling business. When you do something, no one will say, ‘Tony did this.' They will say, ‘Those wrestlers.' The public doesn’t look at us as individuals. They look at us as wrestlers."

Like I said, I’ve always done well with coaches. Part of that stems from the fact that my father wasn’t there for me. I was sitting next to a psychologist on an airplane one day. He said the reason I was that way was because I replaced my father with the coaches. I do good when I have the right motivation, and most of the time, that motivation is nothing more than a kick in the butt.

Vince Jr. always thought drugs were the reason why I didn’t make it to shows, but most of the time, it was because I was getting walked on. If I had been given an option of winning a title, being paid a million dollars, or having a girl walk on me, more than likely, I would choose to get walked on. The boys all talked about how my foot fetish was my weakness.

When I left for LA, Jimmy Snuka was working in the New York territory as a heel. They turned him because they needed a top babyface to replace me. My leaving also opened the door for Rocky Johnson. Rocky had been trying to get into the WWF for a long time, but since they had me and SD Jones, they didn't need another black wrestler. Vince had said, "I have Tony Atlas and SD Jones. I don't need another black guy."

It wasn't a racial thing. It was just the standard business practice of the time. Vince said, "If one of them leaves, you've got a job."

When Rocky came in, Vince gave him a big push, but Rocky never did the business that Snuka did.

SD was glad to see me when I came back because he assumed we would be getting the tag belts. Now, however, there were three black wrestlers in the territory, and somebody was going to be left out. Vince, Sr. wanted to get rid of Rocky and go with his original plan of putting the

tag belts on SD and me, but Mrs. (Lia) Maivia, Rocky's mother-in-law, had been calling Vince all week, begging him to let Rocky stay in the territory. I think Vince felt sorry for Lia because her husband, Peter Maivia, who had been a big star in the WWF, had just died a month earlier [June 1982]. Eventually, she wore Vince down through sheer persistence. Against his better judgment, Vince agreed to keep Rocky.

In those days, the promoters only wanted one or two black wrestlers in a territory at the same time. The thought was that if they had more than that, the black wrestlers wouldn't be a novelty, and they wouldn't stand out when they gave them a push. Looking at it from a business point of view, black professional wrestlers were a commodity, and the promoters were probably correct in their assumptions. If the promoters had too many black wrestlers in a territory, none of them would mean as much.

Rocky thought that in order to stay in a territory,

he had to do whatever he could to get rid of other black wrestlers. He knew it was his only way to the top. A white guy couldn't take Rocky Johnson's spot. A Japanese or Puerto Rican wrestler couldn't take Rocky's job. In those days, the only guy who could take Rocky's place in those days was another black guy, so any black wrestler in the territory was a threat to Rocky Johnson.

At the TV tapings that week, Vince did give me the courtesy of asking me, "Tony, is it okay with you if Rocky stays?"

I had met Rocky in Florida when he was partners with Mark Lewin in Florida, so I said, "Sure."

If I had said, "No, I don't want Rocky here," Rocky Johnson would have been packing his bags. Looking back, I wish I had said no. The fact I agreed to keep him in the WWF was the best thing for Rocky Johnson and the worst thing for me.

Vince, Sr. was an honorable and forgiving

man. Even after I ran out on my bookings and left him high-and-dry, he still wanted to give me a title belt. He wouldn't give me a singles title like the WWF heavyweight title. He wanted it to be the tag team title so he could be sure someone was with me who would take up the slack if I screwed up again. Chief Jay Strongbow said, "I think you should keep Tony and SD as a team and leave Rocky as a single."

The Chief knew SD would do his best to keep me in line. Vince didn't want to do that because Rocky and I both had good physiques, so SD was pushed to the curb. He called Rocky and me to his temporary office at the arena and said, "We're going to put the two of you together." On December 9, 1983, they put the WWF tag team title belts on us.

I thought SD might be upset with me. After all, if it hadn't been for my foolish decision to leave, we would have been the tag team champs eight months earlier. He was a good friend, though. The only

negative thing he said was, "That could have been us, man." The only thing I could say in response was, "I'm sorry, man. I'm so sorry." I felt so bad for SD, especially since it had been me who had ruined his opportunity. That had been SD's best opportunity to make a big name for himself in the business, and I had screwed it up for him. To this day, I feel badly about it. He never did hold it against me, though. Over the years, I apologized to him hundreds of times, and all he said was, "Hey, it's water under the bridge. We had a good time." He told me many times that the best times of his life were the times we spent together.

When Vince, Sr. asked me if I wanted a few days off in order to go back to LA to get my car, Rocky, who was standing there with us, jumped right in and said, "That's okay, Vince. He doesn't have to do that. Since we'll be partners, we'll be riding together, anyway, so he can ride with me. I also have another car at the hotel that he could use."

That wasn't quite the truth. Rocky had two cars

at his hotel, but one of them belonged to Rick "The Model" Martel. Martel had left the car with Rocky for safekeeping. I only learned later that Rocky sold the car to SD Jones. When SD went to get the car registered, he was told the car was registered to Richard Vigneault, which is Rick Martel's real name. When Martel came back the territory to get his car, SD had to return his car. Rocky kept the money and refused to return it to SD.

Based on past experience, I should have known better than to trust Rocky. In 1975, when George Scott sent me to different territories to get experience, one of the places he sent me was Florida. I'm sure the promoter thought, "Since Tony Atlas is black, I'll put him on all the shows with Rocky Johnson. The brothers look after the brothers."

That's what white people thought. "Tony's black. Rocky's black. Tony's a green kid, while Rocky's been in the business for awhile, so he'll take care of him."

On my first night in the territory, Mark Lewin offered to give me a ride. Mark was billed as "Maniac" Mark Lewin, but he was a nice guy. Rocky walked over and said to Mark, "Are you sure you've got room?" Rocky didn't want me in the car. Mark had to convince him to let me ride with them back to Tampa.

The next day, they were supposed to meet me at the hotel lobby. They never showed up. Luckily for me, I was staying at the hotel with Rick McGraw. Rick said, "Let me see what towns you're gonna be in."

He looked at my booking sheet and said, "I'm in all these towns. You can ride with me."

If it wasn't for Rick McGraw, I wouldn't have made any of those towns. I wish I could tell him how much I appreciate what he did for me, but the poor kid died of a heart attack at the age of 30. God rest his soul.

When he was working for the WWF, Rocky lived in New Haven, Connecticut, so after we had our meeting with Vince, Jr., he dropped me off at a hotel in town and said he would pick me up the next day at two o'clock. While I was in the lobby talking to the hotel manager, she asked me when my ride was supposed to be there. I said, "Two o'clock."

"Well, it's two-thirty."

At three o'clock, I called Rocky's house. His wife said, "He already left."

"Is he going to pick me up?"

"He didn't say anything about picking you up."

At 3:15, I called a cab and it cost me $175 to get to the town. When I saw Rocky, he said, "I came by the hotel, but I didn't see you anywhere."

I knew that was a lie because I had been in the lobby, but I didn't press the issue. He did take me

home that night. The next day, I told Vince, "Rocky left me at the hotel yesterday. I don't want anything to do with him anymore. Could you please book SD on the cards that I'm on." Vince was gracious enough to honor my request.

The next run-in I had with Rocky took place when SD wasn't booked on a show, so Rocky was supposed to take me. We were in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where we taped television. We were supposed to be in Hamburg for interviews by noon on the following day, so after the Allentown taping, Vince said, "It's only a twenty-six-mile drive to Hamburg, guys. Anybody who isn't in the Hamburg Fieldhouse by noon will be fined five hundred dollars." Since it was a short trip to Hamburg, we all stayed over in Allentown, but a lot of the guys had gotten into the habit of dragging into the Hamburg Fieldhouse between one and two o'clock, which held up production.

At seven o'clock in the morning, I was at the gym. By 9:30, I was back at the hotel eating

breakfast with Afa and Sika, the Wild Samoans. I told them, "I've gotta meet Rocky. We've gotta leave around eleven o'clock so we can stop at Church's Chicken to get some chicken breasts and still get to Hamburg by eleven-thirty."

At eleven o'clock, I was standing beside Rocky's car. At 11:15, I was knocking on his apartment door. I knew he was in there because I had seen little Rock (Dwayne Johnson) peeking out the window. At noon, Rocky and his son ran out of the building. "We've gotta go. We've gotta go!"

When we arrived in Hamburg, Rocky told me, "Don't worry about being late, Tony. I'll explain everything to Vince."

"Okay, Rock."

A few minutes later, Vince walked up and said, "I'm going to deduct five hundred dollars from your check, Tony. I'm not going to fine Rocky because it wasn't his fault."

"What?"

"Look, Tony. I know you've gotta keep yourself in shape, but from now on, if you want to go work out, go a little bit earlier."

"I was at the gym at seven this morning."

"Well, how long do you workout?"

"I workout from seven to around nine. I was back at the hotel by 9:30 with Afa and Sika. You can ask Afa."

"Well, Rocky just told me the reason he's late is he had to wait for you to get back from the gym.

I tried to explain, but Vince wouldn't believe me. I really can't blame him because I was on his shit list due to walking out on him before. Anytime he heard something bad about me, he tended to believe it.

When I got into the dressing room, I punched

Rocky in the face. Soon after that, they took the titles away from us because we couldn't get along.

Once again, Vince wanted to do something with me ... and once again, I went to LA to see Lori. I wanted to get stoned and walked on. I was supposed to do four shows. I did one. I made the first show and missed the other three.

My problems with Rocky came to a head in the ring one night in Hamilton, Ontario. For the finish of our match, I was supposed to pick up my opponent over my head and press slam him. Rocky would then come into the ring and cover him: 1, 2, 3.

There was supposed to be a code of respect among the boys. We were very protective of our finishes. If somebody had a strong finishing move, nobody else would use that move. For instance, when Jimmy Snuka was on the card, they would ask us to not jump off the top rope. Nobody messed with our finishes, either. If somebody did

something to kill our finish, it was like hurting our livelihood. We depended on it to feed our families, so we avoided doing anything that would hurt one of our fellow workers. When I press slammed my opponent, Rocky jumped into the ring, pulled the guy to his feet, and began a whole new match with the guy. He went six minutes before he beat him with a dropkick. In my day, we called that killing my finish. Nobody had ever gotten up from the press slam. When Snuka dropped onto you from the top rope, you didn't get up. When Mr. Wrestling #2 hit you with his knee, you were down for the count.

When we got back to the dressing room, I told Pat Patterson, "Don't put me with Rocky again! He killed my finish! We can't work together! By the way, here's your belts."

I took my title belt, picked up Rocky's belt, and slammed them both into Pat's chest. Pat took a bump backwards, and as I turned from Pat, I once again sucker-punched Rocky square in the face. I

would have hit him a second time, but the guys all jumped in and covered him.

The next day, I flew back to Newark from Toronto. SD wasn't at the show in Hamilton when it happened, but when he picked me up at the airport the next morning, the first words out of his mouth were, "Brother, what happened last night in Hamilton?" I was amazed he knew about the incident. He had been off that night, so he was at home with his family, and yet, he knew about something that happened in the dressing room in Hamilton, Ontario, less than 12 hours before.

I didn't realize how much damage I had done to myself when I hurt Pat Patterson. Pat had a lot of power in the office, and he would one day become the number two man in the company. After that, Pat only talked to me when it was absolutely necessary.

Vince didn't say anything about the incident. Not one word. That's one thing about the

McMahons. If you do something to offend them, the chances are good they will never mention it to you. They will not confront you. That was the total opposite of Ole Anderson, who would be in my face the very next time he saw me. Vince wouldn't do that. He would wait until you had a day off, like the last time he fired me. When I got home for a 4-day break, my wife was standing in the doorway with a letter in her hands. "You got a letter from the office."

I opened the letter and it read: Your services are no longer needed.

Not too long ago, Chief Jay Strongbow told me Pat Patterson and Gorilla Monsoon were the two guys who wanted me out the most. Pat had good reason for wanting me fired because I showed disrespect to him in front of the boys. I don't blame him one bit for feeling the way he did. Monsoon wanted me out because I made him look bad one night when he tried to take me down in the dressing room. We were play wrestling, but

it got out of hand. When I blocked everything he did, he got mad, and it turned into a shoot of sorts. He was with the office, so I didn't go all out on him. I just blocked his moves. He was embarrassed because the other wrestlers were watching and taunting him. From that day on, he was cold to me.

It was only a couple of years ago that Pat showed me forgiveness. In 2006, right after WrestleMania XXII, I was talking to SD and Monika, my current wife. Pat walked up and kissed me on the cheek in front of all the boys.

Rocky and I dropped the tag team straps in Allentown, to Adrian Adonis and Dick Murdoch on April 17, 1984. During the four months we held the title, we only defended the belts two times: once in Canada, and once when we lost them. The reason we didn't defend them was because we just couldn't get along.

We lost the belts after Vince, Jr. took over the

company and during a time when Vince, Sr.'s health was failing. One of the last major decisions Vince, Sr. made in the business was to make Rocky and me the tag team champions, and he wanted to give us time to get over. That was the way he was. Whenever Vince made up his mind, nothing could change it. When Vince, Jr. took over, however, the first thing he did was take the belts from us.

I didn't leave the territory because I wanted to show Vince that I was serious about straightening out my life and cleaning up my act. I was determined to cut out the steroids, cocaine, and pot, and for the next two years, I lived a real clean life. I didn't even drink beer. I worked out every day, made every show, and caused no problems. Unfortunately, by that time, Vince already had laid out his plan.

Much of this chapter has been dedicated to the problems I had with Rocky, so it's only fair for me to say that Rocky was a great guy to be around. He

had such a good spirit that it was hard to get mad at him, and when you did, you couldn't stay mad for long. He also drew money in almost every territory in which he appeared.

Rocky and I had a long talk at the WWE 2008 Hall of Fame. A lot of the things he did were a result of things he was, or wasn't, told by the office. After cross-referencing some of the things Rocky and some of the other guys told me, I realized where many of the problems began. The office was playing us against each other. They did the same thing with SD, such as the time when they ordered him to not let me live with him. The way I see it, it all boils down to the fact that the office didn't need three black guys in the territory at the same time, so they did things to cause dissension between us.

What people didn't realize was that it didn't take much to keep to me happy. Based on my childhood, if I was able to afford a bologna sandwich, I looked at myself as being rich. That

was the difference between me and most of the other guys in the business. It didn't matter if I ate one meal a day or three. I was happy just being able to make a living doing what I loved to do. Even when I went AWOL from the WWF and went to Los Angeles, I was able to pick up $400 to $500 a week making personal appearances. I wasn't making the living I had been when I was wrestling, but I was surviving, and I was surviving at a much higher level of income than I had been when I was a kid.

Today, people ask, "Don't you miss the big money and all, Tony?"

Sure, I do. I would be a liar to say I don't. In fact, I wish I had it all again, but as long as I can pay my bills, have some ham hocks and beans in the refrigerator, and cable TV, I have everything I need. I worry about my future from time to time, but I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. I wish I had taken care of my finances and set up a good savings account. I wish I owned my own house,

rather than having to live in an apartment. But I can't cry over something that's already done. I just look ahead and do my best to prepare for whatever lies ahead.

Chapter 16
My Worst Enemy

In early 1984, my wrestling career in New York was going gangbusters, but my personal life was a wreck. Every time I came back to our hotel room, men were in the room with Lori. She was a nymphomaniac who would have sex with anybody who looked at her. She also was spending my money like it had no end. Eventually, she moved back to Los Angeles. I continued to use drugs, but I did fine when I was on the road. My problems always got worse when I wasn't booked and had time off. On my days off, I would fly to Los Angeles to see Lori and get messed up. When I got back to work and on the road, I would sober up.

When Lori and I were living in Los Angeles, I got a call from the police. I was working for the WWF and I was out of town at the time. They said my 1980 Corvette was in the ocean.

While I was gone, Lori and one of her boyfriends had parked on the beach and had sex in my car. They had been using crack cocaine, so they took a pill to bring them down from the high. Unfortunately, they passed out in the car. The next morning, while they were still asleep, the tide rolled in … with Lori and her "friend" still in the car … buck naked. They had been stupid enough to lay their clothes on the beach, and during the night, their clothes washed out into the ocean. By the time they woke up, they couldn't drive out because the tires just spun in the soft, wet sand. People were also on the beach by that time, so they were afraid to get out of the car. Somebody eventually called the beach police and they notified me.

I had a tow truck pick up the car. When they

called me to find out where I wanted them to send it, I gave him the address where S.D. Jones lived.

He said, "Is that in LA, Santa Monica, or where?"

I said, "Bronx, New York." The towing company charged me $1,500 to ship my car to SD's house.

The next time I went home, I didn't tell Lori I was coming. We had shows booked in southern California, so I thought I'd surprise her. I skipped the first show after calling Vince and telling him my flight had been canceled. When I walked into the house, Lori and two black guys were snuggled together on our bed … and they were all naked. I did a quick survey of the dresser and saw lines of cocaine, a big bag of weed, a half-full bottle of whiskey … and the room reeked of sex. It didn't bother me that Lori was having sex with someone else. We had an open relationship. For all I cared, Lori could have sex with whoever she wanted. That didn't bother me. All I wanted was to be walked on. What did bother me was finding

the drugs in my house. Vince had hired me back and I didn't want anything to interfere with my job. I was clean of drugs and I intended to stay that way.

Lori and one of the guys owned a lot of audio-electronic equipment (which she had bought with my money). The guy was going to start a band, but they couldn't concentrate on their music because they were high on drugs most of the time. I was really angry, so I got a hammer and smashed the equipment. Of course, they called the police. I told the police, "This is my house. I want them out of here."

The police said, "The only person who is going to leave is you, Tony."

I said, "Why? This is my house."

They said, "Your name isn't on the mortgage."

Whenever I was on the road, I sent Lori anywhere from $500 to $1,000 a week. I'd tell her to keep a

certain amount and use the rest to pay the bills. One time, I sent her $4,000 worth of checks. When I went home a week later to make a $1,000 withdrawal, the teller said, "You don't have enough money in the account."

I was dumbfounded. I said, "You're kidding me."

She said, "I'm surprised there isn't enough money in the account. Your wife comes in all the time and makes withdrawals." Lori would deposit the money, wait for the checks to clear, and then transfer it to another account. One of the bills Lori was supposed to take care of was the mortgage. I had given Lori more than $225,000 to buy a house and Lori and her boyfriend had been spending it instead of paying the mortgage. I wasn't home very often and I had no concept of business, so I left it up to Lori to buy a house and make the payments. Lori couldn't buy a house because she was unemployed, and instead of putting the house in my name, she put it in her mother's. I can hardly blame anyone but myself for getting into that

pickle. Several people told me I should go to Los Angeles for the closing, but I assumed Lori would do what was right.

When the police told me I wasn't the owner of the house, I blew a fuse. Before I knew it, I had been placed under arrest and was sitting in a jail cell. When I was told I could make one phone call, I called the office and talked to Chief Jay Strongbow. After Strongbow relayed the story, Vince said, "Fire him."

Thanks goodness George Scott was working for the WWF at the time. He convinced Vince to allow him to talk with me to find out what had happened. I don't know what George told Vince, but Strongbow called the police and had me out less than four hours later.

I walked away from everything. When I was in Los Angeles in 1991, I talked to Lori's brother. He said Lori and her mother sold the house shortly after I left and moved to Georgia.

Things didn't get any better the next time I saw Vince. When he asked me to verify my story about missing the show because my flight was canceled, I told him it was true. "That's strange," he said. "Tony Garea was on the same flight, and he told me it wasn't."

"Uh-hhh …"

I'm embarrassed to admit I had known Tony was on the flight, but I had forgotten all about it when I arrived in California.

After four years of living that lifestyle, I decided I needed to change. I called SD Jones to ask him if I could stay at his house until I found a place of my own. Are you through with that LA stuff?" he asked.

"Yes, I am."

That was a partial truth. Lori was not good for me, but she held some kind of a weird hold on my emotions, and I couldn't bring myself to cut the ties

completely. However, when I left, I didn't tell Lori I was going, and as things turned out, it would be the last time I saw her.

Junkyard Dog. God rest his soul. He broke me out of the slave-master relationship I had with Lori. Every night for weeks, he had a different girl in our room, waiting to walk on me. He finally found a girl who was a stronger dominatrix figure than Lori. It sounds crazy, but her hold over me was stronger than the hold Lori had on me, and I never went back to Lori after that.

Unfortunately, because I had screwed up so many times, and missed shows because of my unscheduled trips to LA, I had heat with the office. By the time I made the decision to make the change, however, Vince, Sr. had died. He had championed my cause every time I screwed up, but Junior wasn't interested in hearing about my problems and didn't want to put up with my untrustworthiness.

Even though I stayed clean from 1985 until 1989, my return to New York was the beginning of the end for Tony Atlas. I told Vince I was through with "that girl," and that I wouldn't be going back to Los Angeles, but it was too late to convince him I was serious about turning my life around.

I don't want to sound like I'm blowing my own horn, but during that time, Tony Atlas was hot from coast to coast. Most of the guys were hot in one or two territories, but I was hot everywhere. I could have gone to any territory and made money. Bruno Sammartino and I both made special appearances in Houston. When Bruno walked out into the arena, the fans clapped and cheered, but most of the people had no idea who he was. But when I walked out, everybody in the building came to their feet. Even Bruiser Brody, who is a cult figure today for being an independent wrestler who wrestled all over the world, told me, "I'm over in a few territories, Tony, but you're the only wrestler I know that is over from coast to coast. No matter where I go, people know who

Tony Atlas is."

To this day, I run into people all of the time who remember me. I can be in an airport in California and people will walk up and say, "Hey, you're Tony Atlas!" That's because I worked all of the territories, something which most of the guys didn't do.

There were three things the promoters looked for in a wrestler... a good attitude, a personality, and dependability. Somewhere along the line, I lost all three items. A lot of the boys blamed the boss when they got into trouble, especially when they were terminated or suspended for their actions. It was always the fault of Vince McMahon, Ole Anderson, George Scott, or Jim Crockett. They blamed everybody but themselves. They were too self-focused to see there was something missing in them that caused the promoters to discontinue doing business with them.

I was blessed by God with a tremendous

opportunity. The funny thing about it is, I never worked for any of it. Everything I ever had just came to me. George Scott came to me. Ole Anderson came to me. Vince McMahon, Sr. came to me. I didn't have to go out looking for them. They came to me. Did you ever know anybody who had so much luck in their life and screwed it all up?

Ole Anderson said, "Tony Atlas. You are a promoter's dream." Those were his exact words. Thunderbolt Patterson told me, "You've got the world by the balls and you don't even know it."

I had a whole lot of talent in my younger days and I threw it all away. I'm not sure why Vince didn't just fire me outright in 1984. I think he kept me around to watch Hulk Hogan's climb to the top. Just before Hogan won the WWF title, Vince told me, "I want you to remember this … and never forget it. Every time you see Hulk Hogan, I want you to remember these words: that could have,

should have, would have been you. Everything we did for Hogan, we were going to do for you."

I believe he was telling me the truth because I was drawing money. Lou Albano once told me, "Tony, these buildings never sold out before you came."

An indication of my popularity was a photograph in the newspaper on the morning following the August 9, 1980 Shea Stadium show which featured the blowoff match between Bruno Sammartino and Larry Zbyszko. More than 36,000 people packed the stadium for that match. I was surprised when there was a picture of me in the newspaper the next day. I would have thought they would have used a photo of Bruno, Larry, or even Andre. For my match against Ken Patera that night, I received a payoff of $10,000, the biggest payoff of my career.

In 1986, while I was still working for the company, Hogan gave me a ride to the George Washington Hotel in Allentown. Just before I got

out of his limousine, I asked, "Hogan, why won't they do nothin' with me no more?"

He said, "I remember the old Tony Atlas who worked out, partied, but didn't smoke weed, had fun, and still took care of business. The new Tony Atlas, the one I'm looking at now, just parties and has fun." Hogan hit the nail on the head. The "new" Tony Atlas didn't work out very often, and he didn't take care of business. Not too long after that night, Hogan made another statement that hit home with me. "I've seen a lot of people work their way from the bottom to the top. You're the first person I've met, Tony, who worked their way from the top to the bottom." That was so true. I just couldn't handle success, even though everybody handed success to me.

I learned more about the business of professional wrestling after I got out then I did when I was in. The most important lesson was that I owe a thousand people for my success, but I owe only one person for my failure.

Tony Atlas.

I often have people ask me, "Who was your toughest opponent?"

My answer is always the same.

Tony Atlas.

They also ask, "Who was your worst enemy?"

Again, my answer is always the same.

Tony Atlas.

When I was down south, I knew there would be a limit to what I could do and how much money I could make. Later, when Vince found me and really wanted to utilize my talent, I began screwing up. Looking back, it was really strange that I would do that. When I was working for people who were stifling my career, I was a good person who got along with everybody and did what I was asked. And yet, when I got with people who really

wanted to enhance my career, I became a prick! I don't know what was wrong with my head at the time. I can't honestly blame the drugs for all of my problems. I thought I was God. I thought I was untouchable.

I couldn't blame Vince for my problems, either. Both he and his dad did everything in their power to help me become successful, just as George Scott, Ole Anderson, Jimmy Crockett, and Bill Watts did. But, even with all of the help I got from the most powerful men in our business, I couldn't handle the success that was handed to me. How could a guy fail with so much going for him? How could a guy fail when he had so many people behind him?

The Charlotte office paid me to train and gave me the Mid-Atlantic heavyweight title. The promoters in Georgia gave me every major title in the territory. I was made to look so unbeatable that the fans really believed I could beat Harley Race for the NWA world heavyweight title. I don't mean

for this to sound like an insult to Harley, but the first time I lost to him, the people asked me, "How could you let that old man beat you?"

Vince, Sr. gave me a win over Hulk Hogan in Madison Square Garden on March 16, 1981. I pinned him in the middle of the ring. From 1980 until November 1983, I never lost a match by pinfall and very few by disqualification or decisions. Vince put me over all the big names in the WWF: Don Muraco, Greg Valentine, Angelo Mosca, Big John Studd, and Killer Khan. I beat most of the heels in the territory and they were making plans to bring in others. SD Jones told me Vince had plans to put me in a program with Bob Backlund. I also heard Vince, Sr.'s dream was to make me the first black champion.

But …

Every time Vince tried to do something with me, I would do something to screw it up. I was so out of control that Vince was afraid to use me on top. He

never knew when I would go back to what I had become: a total maniac.

My attitude and actions hurt a lot of people. The people Tony Atlas hurt the most were the people who did their best to help me. The promoters should have given me a costume and called me the Punisher.

Later in life, though, my actions would cause me to lose everything … my money, my livelihood, my friends, and even my self-respect.

I owe my success to many, many people.

I owe my failure to just one —

Tony Atlas.

But once again, I'm getting ahead of myself.

Chapter 17

The Downward Spiral

As I explained earlier, my personal life was going downhill at a rapid pace. The WWF was the beginning and the end of my career, the best and the worst times in my life, all wrapped up into one neat package.

The downward spiral of my life is an example of exactly how strong the influence of drugs can have on a person. When I got into the wrestling business, I was a jock. I enjoyed every moment of my life in regards to working out and wrestling. I was more comfortable in the gym or the ring than anywhere else, and when I didn't get to do those things, I would be irritable and bad-tempered.

When drugs were introduced into my life, the desire to get stoned or do cocaine with women overrode my need for both the gym and wrestling. The only things I cared about were women and drugs. Wrestling was no longer my passion.

I had never been much of a drug or alcohol user before I went to work for the WWF. I was a jock, and other than marijuana and dianabol, the closest things I had ever taken in my entire life were the vitamin and protein supplements that supplemented my workouts. Hard drugs, however, were readily available when I arrived in New York. Marijuana was for sissies. Real men did cocaine. I fell right into place with the rest of the crew. Within a few months, I was doing pot, cocaine, and steroids, and the combination of the drugs was taking its toll on both my mind and my body.

The first time I tried cocaine, I was working out every day and I only had four percent body fat. The cocaine caused me to get body cramps and my muscles locked up on me. The other guys were fine, but I could barely stand up and walk. The drugs played havoc with my system for three days, but the problems didn't stop me from doing them a second time. I wanted to be "one of the boys," and that meant doing what "the boys" did.

Those same symptoms took over my system every time I used cocaine. My body wasn't used to hard drugs, and I didn't have the body fat to absorb them. A few hits of cocaine would have me wired for several days. A single joint of marijuana would affect me as if I had smoked ten. It never took much for me. I could make one joint last a week. One puff had a huge effect on me because my body couldn't adapt to it.

I had never been afraid of anybody. It's hard for somebody who benches 650 pounds and squats 800 pounds to be afraid of anything, but the cocaine took me to another level. It made me feel invincible. One day, I was on my way to the airport to catch a flight from Hartford, Connecticut, to Baltimore. I had been snorting cocaine with a girlfriend and, as usual, I arrived at the airport at the last minute. My flight was scheduled to take off at six o'clock, but when I arrived 20 minutes before takeoff, the lady at the gate told me the plane was full. They had overbooked the flight. I had already paid for my ticket, so I said,

"Full? What do you mean it's full? I already paid for my ticket. You need to get me on another flight."

"We will, but we don't have anything else going out until nine o'clock in the morning."

I blew a gasket. "I can't do that! I'm on a show that starts at eight o'clock. I have to catch that flight!"

When she insisted it was out of the question, I got so angry that she called security. A few minutes later, two security agents with two German Shepherds came running up. I was so out of my mind from the drugs that I actually tore open my shirt and said, "Turn 'em loose! I'll break both of their necks!"

The cops thought it was so outrageous that they didn't arrest me. They had never seen anyone rip off his shirt and challenge their dogs. If the new federal laws in place today had been in place then,

I wouldn't have gotten away with it. I would have been thrown into jail and served some serious time.

With Lori hot on my heels, trying to keep up, I stormed outside and got into my Corvette. When I reached the interstate, Lori pulled a joint and a lighter out of her purse. When we reached Baltimore, she was still holding the joint. She never lit it. I drove from Hartford to Baltimore, a distance of 300 miles, in 3½ hours.

That was a rough four years in my life. When I look back on those days, I count my blessings that I quit doing drugs when I did.

The wrestlers were all taking cocaine because it would get us up. When we needed to come back down, we would smoke pot. If we had a show, it was a common occurrence for a wrestler to come into the dressing room, sit down, and pull out a bag. After making his preparations, we would all walk over and take a hit. The next night, I would

bring a bag to share with the other guys.

Adrian Adonis [Keith Franke] was the nastiest man I ever met in my life. He was a sick individual. One time, he stuck a cucumber up his butt, then pulled it out and ate it. That was disgusting. He would even eat boogers. When a policeman pulled me over one night, I handed him my driver's license. He was bald-headed. When Adrian drove by, he threw a slice of bologna at him, and it landed on the back of his head. I don't know if the cop was numb or what … but he never noticed! He just stood there talking to me with a slice of bologna on his head. He wrote the ticket and walked back to his car … with the piece of bologna still on his head. Adrian talked about that forever. "Remember when I threw that piece of bologna and it landed on the cops head?" I couldn't understand why the cop didn't notice because it hit him hard enough to stick to his head, but he never felt it.

With my own eyes, I saw Adrian Adonis sell

crack cocaine to one of the WWF employees. Adonis always had a big supply of drugs, so the guys would buy from him. After buying a bag one night, someone said, "You know we're going to run out tonight. Why don't we go ahead and buy another bag from Adrian so we don't have to go looking for him later." When they found him, Adrian was on the phone, telling Vince that so-and-so had coke. They came back and said, "Do you know what that cock-sucker is doing?" That was the last time anybody bought anything from Adonis. They didn't trust him. That was pretty low. Adonis sold the guy drugs, and then he ratted them out! So many of the guys would smile in your face and cut your throat.

Uncle Elmer [Stan Frazier] used to take a lot of pain pills. He would carry thousands of pain pills with him at all times because he was always in pain. He could take six pills and still be as sober as a priest. One night in 1985, when I was driving from Syracuse to Utica in upstate New York, he gave Junkyard Dog and me one pill apiece. The

Dog's pill kicked in first. As we were leaving the arena grounds, we were in a line of several cars that were moving at less than a walking pace. Dog got impatient because he wanted to get home, so he got out of the car and began kicking the other cars. The people in the parking lot began to crowd around him. After all, he was "The Junkyard Dog." The Dog was oblivious to everything around him, though. His eyes were as big as two half dollar coins and he was soaking wet from sweating. Mike Rotundo, who was traveling with us, told me, "Get Dog settled down or he's going to have a heart attack."

Rotundo drove us to the 7-Eleven to get some beer. As we walked back to the car, I told Mike that I would drive the rest of the way. Dog got in the front seat and Mike sat in the back. After awhile, I said to Mike, "There's sure a lotta trucks on the road."

Mike, who wasn't doing drugs, asked, "What are you talking about? How many trucks do you see?"

"I see five or six of them."

Mike got hysterical. "You see five or six trucks? Pull over!"

When I pulled to the side of the road, I asked him what he was so excited about. He told me there was only one truck on the road. I remember opening the door and stepping out onto the pavement, and wondering why the parking lot was so long. What I didn't realize was that I had parked in the middle of a lane on the interstate. Mike was going nuts in the back seat. The whole time I had been driving, I had been driving on the shoulder of the road. When Mike told me to pull over, I had pulled over onto the interstate. I was really messed up.

When we got to our hotel, the Dog tried to walk, but his legs were too weak, so he went into the hotel lobby on his hands and knees! He said, "I want a room."

The desk clerk didn't see him, but she heard the voice, so she thought it was either me or Mike talking. She kept telling us that we had already booked into the hotel. The hotel staff all knew us because the guy who owned the hotel in Utica used to be a wrestler. Mike and I finally lifted the Dog to his feet so he could check into his room. He stayed up most of the night doing more and more drugs.

The next morning, we had to go to the airport. He didn't want to go, but somehow, Mike and I got Dog to the lobby. He had taken another pill when he woke up and he was seeing Martians. He said, "The Martian has my plane ticket!" He had the ticket in his hand, and was pulling it back and forth, like somebody was trying to pull it away from him. He said, "I need this to get on the airplane. I'm gonna miss my flight! You're gonna make me miss my flight!" When a policeman walked into the hotel lobby, Dog began arguing with him. We finally got him calmed down and put him in the back seat of the rental car, but when we

got to the airport, he began to argue with the lady who was trying to take his ticket.

We told those stories to everybody. From then on, every time Elmer offered somebody a pill, they would say, "Elmer, you can keep that pill."

SD was a good influence on me because he didn't mess with drugs. He used to drink and chew tobacco, but he got a bad ulcer. He had so much pain in his stomach that he could barely work, so Skaaland told him to go to the hospital. The doctor told him if he had waited one more day, he would have been dead. After his operation, he quit using both alcohol and tobacco.

A few weeks later, Vince, Jr. put me on the Tuesday Night Titans [TNT] show. Paul Orndorff and I had a posedown. When I was given the nod by the judges, Paul threw a cake in my face. The office told him to do it, but I didn't know it was coming. After the show, Dog and I had to get to St. Louis, so Vince booked seats on a Learjet. Due to

the way things turned out, I wish I had taken a commercial flight, although the Learjet was nice. The flight crew provided alcohol, cold cuts, shrimp cocktail, cream cheese and crackers, lox, and fresh fruit.

By that time, I was really working hard to fight my cocaine habit because I didn't want to lose my job. The Dog, however, had a habit worse than mine. He would do just about anything to get high. When we got off the jet, Dog arranged for a limousine to pick us up and drive us through the ghetto to find drugs. Naturally, we were late when we arrived at the arena. That didn't matter much to either of us because we were both flying high on the drugs we had scored. I was so messed up that I didn't know if I was late for the show or if I had already wrestled and was on my way home.

That night, I was scheduled to wrestle King Kong Bundy. As I walked into the rear of the building, he was just climbing out of the ring and was headed back to the dressing room. Chief Jay

Strongbow walked up to me and said, "Tony, if you had only gotten here five minutes earlier, we could have saved that match."

The Dog, of course, was working higher up on the card than I was, so it didn't matter that he was late because he made his match. I missed mine, so I was officially on Vince's shit list.

In those days, we almost never got a day off. We never got a week off during the summer to go on vacation with our families. We worked year-round and there was always another town to go to. We dreamed of nothing more than to be able to lay back and relax, if only for a day or two. The fans were getting their enjoyment from us and the promoters were enjoying the money we were bringing into the box office. The only ones who weren't really receiving any type of enjoyment were the performers.

I'm not making an excuse for our use and abuse of drugs, but in a sense, they were our only avenue of

escape. Other than the long, grueling, boring hours on the road with nothing better to do, that's the only reason I can give to explain why drug use was so rampant in the wrestling business.

I did a lot of drugs, but the only drugs I ever bought were steroids. I never bought any other drugs. The guys all shared what they had with everybody. They didn't buy their drugs, either. They were given to them.

You have to understand the mindset of the public in those days, and I'm not just talking about wrestling fans. We were wrestlers, celebrities, and TV superstars who were bigger-than-life. Whatever we wanted, we got. When we went to a nightclub, there would be people there who would supply us. Fans would show up at the hotel and hand drugs to us. I was always getting introduced to drug dealers, who would give us whatever drugs we wanted.

You might wonder why people would give drugs

to us for free, especially drug dealers who made their living selling drugs. The main reason was they wanted to be associated with us. By supplying drugs, they got to hang out with "the boys," which gave them bragging rights with their friends. We got them free tickets for the matches. We let them party with us. They even got to screw the arena rats. All anybody had to do in return was bring $300 worth of cocaine and they were "in like Flynn." SD was like the father-figure I never had. He wouldn't touch drugs with a 10-foot pole. It would piss him off when somebody would give me drugs. He would always say, "I wish those guys would stop giving you that stuff!"

I'm not saying this as a way to excuse my actions because we all make our own choices and we're personally responsible for the consequences, but part of the reason why I did drugs was because I hated to disappoint people. If I walked into the john to take a leak and one of the guys was there snorting cocaine, it would be awkward. He would be worried that I would tell the office, so I would

walk over to take a hit and make him feel better. Yes, that sounds like a lame excuse, but in part, it was definitely one of the factors that influenced me to do drugs. Of course, by doing that in order to make him feel better, I went back to the dressing room all fucked up.

There were many nights when I would fly into a rage and clear the dressing room. I did that one night and ran everybody out, including Andre the Giant. That night, Lori was waiting for me at the hotel, and she had just bought a new pair of shoes. All I could think about was going to the hotel to party with Lori. I wanted to get walked on. Unfortunately, Vince booked me on the last match of the night. He used to put me on last because he knew the people would stay to see my match, but all I could think was that while I was wrestling, just about everybody else would be having a good time at the hotel.

I was so mad after my match that I pulled out my .357 Magnum and began to wave it around. Mere

seconds after the gun cleared my gym bag, I had the whole dressing room to myself. Cyndi Lauper and David Wolfe were there that night. Cyndi was standing just a few feet from the dressing room door when Andre came running out. When he saw her, he stopped dead in his tracks and stood still. Except for one boot, he was buck naked. Cyndi was so taken by surprise that her lower jaw dropped down and she froze in place, staring at the naked behemoth that stood in front of her.

Vince sent someone to find SD, because he knew SD was the only person who could calm me down. SD said, "Come on, boss man. I got your shoes for ya. I got your shoes for ya." He knew that once he mentioned the shoes, everything would be cool … and it was. SD took me back to the hotel.

I was in Springfield, Massachusetts one time. A girl I wanted to date wanted to use the pay telephone, but the security cop wanted to use the

phone at the same time. She came to me and told me the cop had pushed her off the phone. I didn't consider talking as an option to settle the problem. I grabbed the cop and began to choke him. That's a true story! His friends had to pull me off. When the cop regained his senses, he apologized to me. He said, "I'm so sorry. I didn't realize that was your lady." That sounds crazy, but we were celebrities. We could do whatever we wanted without suffering any consequences. It's possible we might have gotten away with murder. After all, O.J. Simpson did!

And then there was WrestleMania I, the first WrestleMania presented by the WWF. The show was scheduled to take place at Madison Square Garden on March 31, 1985 and I was booked to wrestle King Kong Bundy. I was staying at the Ramada Inn on 47th Street and 8th Avenue where all the boys stayed after the Garden shows. On the afternoon of the show, Arnold Skaaland came up to my room and said, "You have the night off, kid. You don't really need to be there. You're

already over with the people. We're trying to get some other guys over." Arnold reached into his briefcase and pulled out a check. "Here's a two-thousand-dollar check. You can either take it to the bank or you can sign it over and I'll cash it for you now."

I was shocked. I said, "Wow, this is wonderful. I get the day off and two-thousand dollars on top of it."

Everybody had two weeks off after the show, so Arnold said, "We want you to take your wife on a nice vacation. Have a good time."

As soon as Arnold left, I said to Lisa (my wife at the time), "Let's go out." We drank wine and ate Paella, a Spanish dish made of rice, seafood, and green peppers, at my favorite restaurant. I was so grateful to be working for a company like the WWF.

What I didn't know was Vince had paid me

$2,000 because he didn't want me at WrestleMania. I had been fighting with Saito. I had been in a brawl with Paul Orndorff. I had waved a gun in the air and chased everyone out of the dressing room. The boys were always scared of what I might do. S.D. used to tell me, "Tony. The boys are all scared of you." Vince didn't want trouble because he had celebrities like Phil Collins, Billy Martin, Muhammad Ali, and Liberace coming, and he knew I couldn't be trusted to act in a rational manner. S.D. took my place that night and put Bundy over in 23 seconds.

I never appreciated the significance and importance of that first WrestleMania show until the videos came out. When I watched the show, I thought, "Damn, how did I get left out of that?"

In 1986, I was at the first Slammy Awards ceremony in Baltimore. A month or so before the event took place, one of the guys who worked for the office asked for photos of me press slamming someone. I removed one of the photos from my

scrapbook and gave it to him. He later told me he made the Slammy trophy based on that picture. When you look at the statue, think Tony Atlas. After the first awards ceremony was over, I asked Vince if I could have a statue. "Vince, since you used my image, you should give me one." All he said was, "Do you know how much they cost me? He never gave me one. They should call it the Tony Award. Oh, yeah. They already have one of those.

We would get kicked out of hotels all the time. No matter how great of a deal we got, somebody would screw it up. When I was wrestling in the WWF, we stayed at the Bradford Hotel in Boston. The average person in the hotel was paying $89 a night. The owner of the Bradford was an old man who loved wrestling so much that he said we could always stay at his hotel, and he only charged us $25 a night. Since I was rooming with SD, we split the expense, which meant I was only paying $12.50. To top it off, the hotel was in a great location.

One night, Angelo Mosca got drunk and decided to pee on the people who walked out of the elevator. When the hotel owner walked over to see what the commotion was all about, Angelo turned around and peed on him. That night, the old man knocked on the door of every wrestler's room and told us to get out. It didn't matter that it was three o'clock in the morning. He wanted us to leave right then.

When I was in Atlanta, Ole and George couldn't understand my change of attitude. I had such a hard life as a kid. I never owned anything in a material sense, and when the world was handed to me on a silver platter, I became the most bad-tempered, irritable, son-of-a-gun you could ever meet in your life. The biggest problem with that was that if I didn't want to do something in the ring, there was nobody in the WWF, other than Andre the Giant, who could make me do it. I honestly believe that when I was in that state of mind, the boys were scared of me.

In 2007, SD talked to one of the guys who had been an announcer for Vince. He told SD, "Tony was quite obnoxious."

SD said, "No, Tony's nothin' like that. He's a nice guy. He'd give you the shirt off his back."

"Are you sure? That don't sound nothin' like the Tony Atlas that I knew."

The truth is, they were both correct in their assessments. I always was generous to people, especially those in need, but when I was on drugs, I turned into a different person. It was like a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde scenario. At WrestleMania XIII, Chief Jay Strongbow told me, "Tony, if you were just half as nice twenty years ago as you are now, you would have so much money today that you'd need wheelbarrows to carry it all."

So, from all the things people told me later, I must not have been too nice of a person. Most of the trouble I got myself into was just that: trouble I got

myself into. On the other hand, everybody seems to think I lost my career due to drugs, but that isn't the case. My real problem wasn't the drugs. It was those damned shoes. People have no idea how weak I am to that.

The strangest thing about my cocaine use was that it never had the control over me that weights did. If I went to the gym and my bench was down five pounds, the weights took control of my life. For me, weightlifting was as powerful a drug as cocaine, but it was beneficial to my career, rather than detrimental. That was the one thing that kept me from really getting involved in hardcore drug use. I had a limit … and that was midnight. I would never stay up later than that. By midnight, I was in bed and on my way to sleep. I would be up by eight o'clock, have myself a light breakfast, and be at the gym by nine. That was what kept me from getting too involved in drugs.

The one drug I never had a problem with was alcohol, but a lot of the guys did. A few days

before the fight broke out between Duggan and Matt Borne [as related in chapter 11], I was booked to wrestle Jim Duggan in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He was so drunk that he had trouble getting into the ring. Before our match, Grizzly Smith told me I had to put Jim over. When Jim put his foot on the ring steps to climb up into the ring, he missed the step. He tried it a second time, and his foot went off the side. Each time he missed, the crowd would go, "Whoa!" He gave them the opportunity to do that several times. After several attempts, he finally made it into the ring.

Shortly after we began wrestling, we did a high spot where he was supposed to tackle me, but in doing it, he tripped and fell out of the ring. As he repeated the difficult process of climbing the steps, the crowd again chanted "Whoa!" with each misstep. Once again, he somehow managed to stumble to the top of the steps and get into the ring.

After a few minutes of throwing each other around, I picked up Duggan for a slam … and fell

backwards to the mat with him draped over my chest. He tried to get up, but I held onto him with every ounce of strength I had. I looked at the ref and said, "Ref! Make the count."

That was how I did the job for Jim Duggan. When I got to the dressing room, Grizzly told me, "A good worker can have a match with a broom handle. Tonight, you proved that you could do that."

Tommy Rich also had a problem with alcohol. One night, Tommy and I were wrestling against Ole and whoever he had as a partner. When Ole was in the ring with Tommy, he was calling spots, but Tommy wasn't listening to anything. Ole suddenly arm-whipped Tommy over into our corner. I didn't know what to think because the whole purpose of a tag team match was to keep your opponent away from the corner where his partner stood, and make your opponent fight to get to that corner. Ole took Tommy's hand and slapped it against my hand. When Ole and I

locked up, Ole said, "What in the hell is he on today?"

I say all that to make the point that I never went to the ring, or to the gym, under the influence of alcohol or drugs. To be honest, I didn't do those things because I knew I couldn't wrestle or work out when I was under the influence. Whenever I did drugs, I would be unable to function for two days. It took me that long to recuperate.

In regards to steroids, the guys in bodybuilding and weightlifting would buy and take steroids privately. Both purchases and usage were kept a secret. Nothing was done in the open. If you were curious and wanted to know whether or not they were on the roids, they would all deny it and say, "No! This is all natural." In the wrestling business, however, the doctor handed them out in the dressing room.

Before going to the WWF, I had taken Dianabol and Winstrol in both Georgia and Charlotte, but I

did them no more than two months out of the year. Even then, I only did them before a bodybuilding or weightlifting competition. That's why I'm still muscular today. I didn't use steroids to build muscles or put on size. I developed my muscles naturally, in the gym, when I was young. I only used steroids to give me an edge when I was in competition. Six weeks before a contest, I got on the juice. If I didn't have a contest scheduled, I didn't fool with them.

That was really the only time I used steroids. I never used them to get big. That's why I still look the way I do. As I dieted down to lose body fat, the steroids would keep me from losing muscle size. For example, if I weighed 270 and dieted down, I might go into the contest at 230. But if I was on the juice, I would go in at 250. I could do a 550 bench naturally. When I went on the juice, my bench went up to 600, 650. Neither the gains in my body weight, nor the increase in the amount of weight I could lift, was enough to justify my continual use of steroids.

Ivan Putski showed me pictures he had taken when he was fat and told me to see Dr. George Zahorian, who was in the dressing room in Allentown. I walked over and asked Zahorian for whatever he gave Ivan. Not only did he give me the drugs, but he also gave me needles. I took the steroids back to where I had my bag and shot up right there. The steroids made me as strong as an ox, but they also made me as crazy as hell.

Zahorian didn't only provide steroids. He would hold up a huge bottle of yellow jackets [speed] and ask, "Who wants them?" He would pull bottles and bags of drugs out of his bag and just throw them to people at random. The guys would leave Dr. Zahorian with arms full of black beauties, pain pills, and steroids.

There was another big difference in the way steroids were handled in New York. When I was in Georgia, I did steroids, but they were all in pill form. When I got to New York, everything was being injected. That's when the shit hit the fan.

Two months after my initial introduction to Dr. Zahorian, my strength was phenomenal. My weight shot up from 250 to 307 pounds with only four percent body fat, and that wasn't even my heaviest. I was at my biggest when I was in Texas.

The first time I actually used steroids was when I was working in Atlanta. Doc Neely told me to get them from a doctor, then the guys in the gym told me which doctor to visit. The doctor took the time to tell me about the problems that could be associated with long-term use of steroids. I ignored a lot of good advice in my life, but that was the one time I listened and took heed to what I was told.

Steroid use has long-lasting effects on the human body. The doctor would normally give us a 30-day supply. He explained that it took four weeks for the steroids to work their way out of my system, then another four weeks for my system to begin working on its own. In addition to that, my testosterone hadn't been working on its own for

those two months, so I had to lay off the steroids for a full two months before my natural hormones kicked in. Taking all of that into account, you should only use steroids for three or four months each year.

I was a firm believer in cycling on and off, and I never did more than three or four cycles a year. As a rule, my schedule was on for a month, off for two. I wanted to keep my liver. Superstar Billy Graham told me he used steroids for eight years, non-stop. He never cycled off. The steroids destroyed his joints and his liver. I always went to the doctor and listened to what he said. He gave me a physical and said, "Don't take these any longer than four weeks. After four weeks, come back to see me, Tony, and I'll write you another prescription with the date for when you can pick up your next supply."

Of course, even though steroids were initially intended to be a supplement to a regular workout program, the boys began to abuse them and took

them on a regular basis. Instead of taking a month off (what we call cycling), they took them every month. Before long, the side effects were causing people to talk about how bad steroids were.

No, steroids are not necessarily bad. The abuse of steroids is bad.

I remember Wahoo McDaniel walking into the dressing room when a couple of guys were shooting themselves in the ass. Wahoo said, "So, you're gonna get like Tony Atlas."

One of the guys said, "Wadda ya mean?"

Wahoo said, "You're gettin' ready to compete in a contest."

He said, "I'm not going to a contest."

Wahoo said, "Then why in the hell are you taking that stuff?"

That's why nobody realized that guys like Jake

Roberts and Roddy Piper were on them. They didn't work out with weights. In that case, the only thing the steroids do is help your body recover faster. Normally, it takes about 48 hours for a muscle to recover, but with the help of steroids, they can recover the next day. That allows you to work out harder in the gym. People don't realize steroids don't make muscle grow. It's the work you do that makes the muscle grow, and the steroids help the muscle recover more quickly.

I never experienced any side effects from the use of steroids, mainly because I followed the doctor's prescription. The guys who saw the side effects were the guys who didn't listen to what their doctor told them. For instance, if you see Ivan Putski now, he weighs a lot less than he did when he was wrestling, and he looks like he never lifted a weight in his life. Everybody knows the story of Superstar. The guys who abused steroids are in bad shape now. Their bodies are a mess. They can't work out or do anything. Several of the guys who died young, like Eddie Guerrero, had

enlarged hearts.

The problems fall back to self-responsibility. The world has reached a point where, when a person does something, they blame the consequences on something other than themselves. They blame it on alcohol, on drugs, on society. Everybody is at fault … except them. Mass murderers and serial killers never took a steroid in their life. They were born killers. It's like my foot fetish. I don't have to be drunk to get off on shoes. It's just me. I'm going to do it whether I'm stoned or sober.

At the time, nobody thought steroids could hurt us because we got them from doctors. It wasn't until after I got out of the business that I learned about the serious health problems that could be associated with steroids. There are similar problems with many of the prescription drugs on the market today. The drug companies create and market a drug, make as much money as they can from the sales of the product, then discover there

are serious health consequences that result from use of that product. The companies only tell us about those problems, however, after they get a big return on their investment.

We couldn't inject ourselves in front of our wives or girlfriends, so everybody injected themselves or each other right in the dressing room. We would stand in the center of the room and inject each other in the ass. It became a common, almost-nightly, sight in the dressing room.

I couldn't get steroids when I was working in Puerto Rico. Some of the guys had them, but they told me they didn't work too well because the steroids were made for horses. How crazy was that? Why would anybody take something that was developed for the metabolism of a horse?

I've been told that Eddie Guerrero was clean for several years before he died, but he worked out like a maniac. His heart was under a lot of stress. When I competed in bodybuilding contests,

I would go on a diet of zero carbs for six weeks. After the contest, I ate strawberry shortcakes and carbs like you wouldn't believe because maintaining such low body fat levels for a long time puts a lot of stress on the heart. If you look at old pictures of me, I'm ripped in some and smooth in others. My look all depended on what I was training for at the time. Look at old photos of Arnold Schwarzenegger. He didn't stay ripped constantly, either. In the off-season, he wore long shirts and looked bulky.

If you wanted to stay ripped, you had to diet, and most diets lack specific nutrients that your body needs. Eddie Guerrero had to stay ripped all of the time because the guys always had to look like they were headed to competition. In reality, they were always in competition. The guys had to look their best at all times because they were always competing for that top spot. That will stress out anyone's body.

I had it pretty easy when I was in the business

because I was in better shape than just about everybody else even when I was out of shape. This isn't meant to be a knock on them, but I was competing against guys like Dusty Rhodes and Harley Race. They were both great workers, but they didn't have bodies like ninety percent of the guys do today, so I looked better than them even when I was smooth. Eddie was faced with tremendous pressure to stay ripped because today, everybody is ripped and in shape.

You can't really say steroids are bad in and of themselves. Eating two aspirins a day can be very beneficial to your health, but you could develop serious health problems if you took 20 a day. That being the case, would it be right to say aspirins are bad?

The same can be said for alcohol and tobacco. You can drink three beers and smoke two cigarettes a day and never have a problem, but if you drink a six-pack of beer and smoke a pack of cigarettes every day, you'll definitely wind up with

health problems. The problem doesn't stem from what you do. The problem comes from over-indulging.

Superstar Billy Graham used steroids non-stop for eight years. That's why he had problems. I didn't worry about myself because I could see guys like Billy going overboard, and I didn't allow myself to fall into that trap.

Steroids can be beneficial when used in moderation or under a doctor's supervision (and I'm not talking about Dr. Zahorian). Unfortunately, a lot of the guys had more than one doctor, so they could get multiple prescriptions. Eventually, they stopped going to their doctors altogether in order to avoid paying $100 for the physical exam. In addition, they paid another $30 each time the doctor wrote a prescription and 50 dollars to get the prescription filled. When it was all said and done, the cost of 30 pills was close to $200. It was much cheaper to get them from Dr. Zahorian, or buy a hundred pills in Mexico for $50 and slip

them across the border. What would you do? I know what the boys did. They did it without going through a legitimate doctor. They thought they were cheating the system, but what they were really cheating was their health. I never cheated. I listened to the doctors and followed their advice, and I only got steroids from them. I never got them from somebody in the gym, or from one of the boys in the dressing room.

In my opinion, steroids should be allowed under a doctor's care. There are different types of steroids available. I took testosterone for awhile, but it elevated the leveI of estrogen in my body and I developed bitch tits [gynecomastia], so I had to stop. I already had a high testosterone level, so the supplemental testosterone messed up my body completely. I never got rid of the bitch tits and I now wear a singlet to cover them.

That's why I feel it's important to use steroids only under the supervision of a doctor. The doctor knows what you can and can't take. The doctor I

saw didn't prescribe testosterone because he knew I already had a naturally-high level of testosterone in my body. When the boys eliminated the doctors, that's when everybody began having problems. The guys were taking things they shouldn't have been taking. People don't realize steroids are just like any other medication. When I took the pills from Uncle Elmer, I began to hallucinate. Uncle Elmer was getting them from the doctor, so he was able to take them without any negative effects, but they had a negative reaction in my body. If I got steroids from a guy at the gym, it could do more harm than good. Medication is medication. I've heard people say things like, "You have a headache that won't go away? My doctor gave me this. Take this!" And the boys would give you a pain pill the doctor subscribed for them. That pill might kill you because it wasn't prescribed for you. I might not be very educated, but my mother didn't raise a complete fool. Common sense always told me that doctors would know more than Tony Atlas, so I took their advice.

I began using steroids regularly in 1981 and the last time was in 1988 when I competed in the APF World Bench Press Championship in Denton, Texas. Other than using them while training for a few bodybuilding and powerlifting contests, I quit using steroids in 1984 when Rocky and I dropped the belts to Dick Murdoch and Adrian Adonis. Vince kept telling us that Rocky and I were going to get a rematch, but we never got it. Rocky eventually went to Vince and said, "You're not gonna make a job boy out of me like you did SD."

I left the WWF in May 1984 and didn't go back until October. In between those months, I went to work for Verne Gagne in Minnesota. Verne was very good to me.

I wrestled Nick Bockwinkel in Chicago and he made me look so good that the people were saying they thought I should have won the match. When I went upstairs to wait for him to finish showering so I could thank him for the match, I heard Bobby

Heenan tell Nick that he sold too much for me. He said, "He's in and out of here, and the only reason he's here is to put you over. You gave him too much." Bobby was correct. I was the new kid in town, and temporarily, at that, and Nick was the AWA world champion.

Jim Brunzell and I were the first team to beat the Road Warriors in the middle of the ring. Verne gave us a win over the Roadies for the AWA tag team title at the Showboat in Las Vegas, but when I told him I needed time off to do a tour of Africa for Vince, he refused to recognize the title change. I told him Vince was paying me $10,000 for the tour, but I would be back to fulfill my commitments. To his credit, in the days that followed before I left, Verne didn't job me out, and he even put me over some of his top guys, like Larry Zbyszko and Mr. Saito.

When I got my plane ticket, it was a one-way ticket to Hamilton, Ontario. I thought that was odd because I would need a return flight to

Minneapolis when the tour was over, but I just shrugged and figured Vince would take care of it when I returned. On October 30, 1984, in Hamilton, Vince gave me two wins on TV. I thought that was odd, too, because Verne wouldn't like me appearing on Vince's TV. Then Vince said, "The trip to Africa has been canceled. Here's two thousand dollars, anyway. You just have to sign this paper. It confirms that you received your advance."

I signed the paper without reading it. When I asked Vince for a ticket back to Minneapolis, he said I couldn't go back. It wasn't a part of the deal. The paper I had signed said I was under contract to Vince, and I had to go through him if I wanted to work for anybody else. When I asked him if I should call Verne, he said, "Don't worry about it. I already called Verne and he's okay with it."

I later learned that Verne was never contacted. He never understood what happened,

and probably assumed I had skipped out on him. I should have shown more character and picked up the phone to at least call and thank Verne.

Vince took good care of me, but after a few months, he booked shows in Verne's territory and sent me there to do jobs. Even with the losses, I kept myself strong, thanks to the advice Ole Anderson gave me. "The loser gets eighty percent of the match. Doing a job cannot hurt you if you know how to do it." During that time, every match I lost in Verne's territory was a Bunk Harris match. Tony Atlas became Bunk Harris! Surprisingly, Vince never said a word about it.

Vince kept me working steadily in 1985 and 1986, but he no longer booked me in the main event matches. For a majority of those two years, I worked in the middle of the cards, but by spring 1986, I found myself working more and more often in the opening matches. Vince jobbed me out [made me lose matches] more and more often. I

didn't mind doing jobs, but I wasn't going to be made out to look like a fool. One night on television, he told King Kong Bundy to beat me in four minutes. Usually, I did whatever the promoter asked, but when I got to the ring on that particular night, I decided to do what I had been taught. Ole Anderson and George Scott taught me that old-school knowledge of how to take care of myself. The standard and accepted formula for a top wrestler doing a job is that the guy doing the job takes eighty percent of the match. Of course, that often depended on whether or not he could whip the guy he was wrestling, but that was just a part of the business in those days. In other words, I was going to kick Bundy's ass around the ring for eighty percent of the match. The remaining twenty percent would go to Bundy, and a big part of that would be his comeback at the end when he beats me. I knew I was in the right. Eighty percent of a four-minute splash means Bundy doesn't get in much more than his splash. After four minutes went by, I was still on the offense. Vince, Jr., who was watching through the curtain, must have been

thinking, "Come on, Tony! Go home!"

I went more than eight minutes, and I controlled Bundy for more than seven minutes of the eight. Afterwards, just as I had been taught, I went to the heel dressing room to thank Bundy for the match, but I stopped outside the door when I heard Vince ask, "Tony has been jobbing to everybody and you did an eight-minute match with him. Why didn't you go home at four minutes like I told you?"

Bundy said, "Have you ever tried to do something physically to Tony Atlas that he didn't want you to do? If Tony doesn't want to go home, there's nothing I can do about it. I'm not going to fight Tony. He's too strong."

I stepped through the door, thanked Bundy for the match, then turned around and walked away. Vince just stood there without saying a word. I believe he understood that I had to protect myself. I was willing to do the job, but I had to come out with some dignity.

That was a part of my problem. People just couldn't handle me. Andre the Giant had the same attitude. If Andre didn't want you to do something, you weren't going to do it. To make my point, I had everything going for me. I was stronger than just about anybody else in the business. I could wrestle, I could work, and I was fast. The only thing wrong with me was that I was screwed up in the head. I didn't have the brains to go along with the physical talent.

I met a guy who said he had a tape of me wrestling Paul Orndorff in 1984. He said, "I always thought Orndorff was tough until I saw him in the ring with you."

I said, "What do you mean?"

"Well, at the beginning of the match, you picked him up over your head, walked over to the corner of the ring, sat him down on the turnbuckle, and patted him on the head."

I asked, "Did I give him much in that match?"

"No, you didn't give him much. You threw him around for all but the last half minute of the match or so. It came across like you were saying, 'This is my house, and you're going to do what I want you to do.' You controlled every little bit of that match."

I later saw a video of that match and I remembered the circumstances. Paul was going over, but I wasn't going to be made out to be a fool. I remembered what Gene Anderson had told me. "There's nothing wrong with doing a job, but when you do, make sure you protect yourself." I learned how to do that. I went into the match thinking, "You may win the match, but I will win the battle."

One time, I was booked against Ted Arcidi. Ted was known as the "World's Strongest Man." Most of the guys tried to hide it, but Ted would inject himself with steroids in plain sight in the dressing

room. I believe he would have shot up in the ring if they had let him. He set a world bench press record of 700.5 pounds in 1985, but he didn't know how to use his strength in a contest with another man. No matter what I did, Ted refused to sell anything for me. Red Bastien was doing the color commentary at ringside. I didn't want to screw up because I needed the money, so I leaned over the ropes and said, "Red, I've gotta teach this guy how to sell."

Red looked at me and said, "Do what you've gotta do." Basically, he was telling me I wouldn't lose my job. Red was an old-timer, and he knew Ted was doing me wrong. I had to make Ted sell because he wouldn't do it voluntarily. Shoots don't build heat and they don't sell tickets. Regardless, I let Ted have it. I put him in a chicken-wing and pushed him back. The "World's Strongest Man" began to cry like a baby and had tears rolling down his cheeks. Of course, I wasn't too popular in the office when they heard what I did, but Red told the background story to

Pat Patterson, the head booker, so I wouldn't lose my job over it.

On August 25, 1986, Vince had me do a job for Adrian Adonis in Madison Square Garden. The people all began to chant, "Bullshit!" They just didn't believe Adonis could beat me. That was my last shot in the Garden until 1990. After my match that night, Vince came to me and said, "You're one of the best I've got. I haven't seen many wrestlers with your physique who have your ability in the ring or likeability with the crowd." Then he went on with the bad stuff. "Tony, I can't use you on top because I can't trust you. I don't know what you're going to do. On the other hand, I can't use you on the bottom because the people don't believe you can be beat. So what can I possibly do with you? Some of the guys aren't making the shows, and you're one of those guys. I'm going to make an example out of you because people know that if I'm willing to fire Tony Atlas, then I'd be willing to fire anyone."

I was the example. The most important thing I want everyone to understand is that I put myself in the position to be that example. I don't blame Vince. Vince had a problem with the talent, and he knew what he needed to do. He figured if he fired one of his top guys (admittedly, one of his top guys who caused a lot of problems), the other guys would think, "I'd better be careful. Hell, if Vince fired Tony Atlas, he'd fire anybody."

Vince was right on the money. I had left him with no alternative. I packed my belongings that night and left the following day.

Chapter 18
The Black Superman

When I left the WWF, I went to Texas. I had just been through my second divorce and I didn't have any money. That didn't bother me because, like most of the boys, I thought the big payoffs would

never end. My thinking at the time was, "I'll just make it again."

In 1987, George Scott brought me into Dallas as the "Black Superman." The gimmick was George's idea and I wore a Superman outfit. He thought it would be a good change since I had been doing the Mr. U.S.A. gimmick for such a long time. At that time, I weighed 307 pounds, the heaviest weight of my career.

We got things going in Texas, but every time business seemed poised to take off, Fritz von Erich, the promoter, would do something to kill the momentum. He wanted his boys to be on top, and he wouldn't let anybody get billing above them. Unfortunately, the Von Erich boys weren't drawing any money, and if nobody else could bypass them, then nobody was going to make any money. I averaged around $400 a week, which sounds like a lot of money, but we had a lot of expenses on the road.

For a short time (a very short time), we began to draw some serious money, although the reasons for the upswing in business were accidental. Brian Adias had a finish like the one used by Ernie Ladd in which he taped up his thumb and drove it into the throat of his opponent. One night, he used it on Kerry von Erich. For some reason, Kerry had a seizure when he fell to the mat. It was a complete shoot, not a work. There was a lot of speculation about the reasons for the seizure, but nobody knew what caused it. A lot of guys say it had something to do with drugs, but nothing has ever been proved. The following week, every town we went to was sold out. Before that, the territory had been dead. The average wrestler was making $75 a night and wrestled about four times a week. The week after the match Brian had with Kerry, we began averaging $250 to $400 a night and Brian was the hottest heel in the territory. Brian had more heat on him from that one incident, and it all happened by accident. After a couple of weeks, Kevin came back and we had a big show in a rodeo stadium in Mesquite. Kevin beat Brian in

the middle of the ring. In the weeks that followed, Kerry beat Brian in every town in the territory, and he did it in a strong, convincing fashion. In each town where Kevin beat Brian, business went back to the level it had been before the seizure incident took place. We could not believe how quickly Kevin beat Brian. He killed the territory and the good times lasted less than a month.

That's a good example of how wrong the guys are when they say Vince killed the territories. Vince didn't put them out of business. Their arrogance and ignorance is what put many of them out of business.

While wrestling in Dallas, I also did advertisements for Dan Lurie's bodybuilding magazines, competed in bodybuilding contests, and placed third in the World Bench Press Championship in 1988. For a short time, I made special appearances for Joe Weider in stores which carried his equipment.

I did pretty well in Dallas while George Scott was booking the territory. The first thing he did was put Dingo Warrior [Jim Hellwig] and me together as a team. George stuck out his neck for me a lot of times. Years before, when we were both working for the WWF, Vince had wanted him to fire me, but George always stood up for me. I felt like I was a son to him. To this day, I show George Scott's picture to people and say, "This is my father."

In June 1987, George paired me with Skip Young. Skip was the fastest, most outstanding wrestler I ever teamed with. He was a tremendous athlete and a good friend, but he also was a very racist man. It's hard to believe, but he was worse than Thunderbolt. He also was temperamental and it didn't take much to make him mad. He felt like the whole world was against him, and the world owed him. Skip never got a real break in the business, and he was annoyed because I had. One night he told me, "You can't do half the stuff I can do, but you make all the money." What he didn't

realize was that it didn't matter who the best worker was. The only thing that mattered was how many asses you could put in the seats. He drew well wrestling in Florida when Dusty Rhodes gave him a push as a masked wrestler named Sweet Brown Sugar, but I heard he got fired because he was running around with a white girl who was related to Dusty. Right or wrong, Skip knew there was an unspoken rule against black men dating white women, but he ignored it. I remember George Scott calling me into the office one time, early in my career, and telling me, "Keep your mouth shut, do as you're told, and stay away from white girls." When I stood there waiting for more, he said, "That's it."

Skip said Dusty didn't like blacks, but I never knew Dusty to have a problem with blacks. Dusty just didn't like Skip. A lot of guys didn't like Skip, and it was because he had a bad attitude and he blamed everything on the color of his skin. I remember Ole Anderson telling him one time, "Skip, the reason we don't push you is because you

sound like a white man. You don't talk like a black. You need to talk that jive talk like Thunderbolt or Rufus R. Jones." Ole wasn't alone in that respect. Most promoters felt that if a black man looked too educated, he wouldn't draw the black people. It really wasn't stereotyping blacks. At the time, there were still a lot of blacks who didn't have much of an education. For example, I was the only person in my family to finish high school. The promoters had the same attitude about Japanese and Polish wrestlers. Most of those "foreign" wrestlers could speak perfect English, but they were expected to use broken English in order to play the part and convince the fans of their ethnicity.

Skip did make some good points about being held back, though. While we were sitting on the turnbuckles during an outdoor show in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Skip said, "We're the first black tag team champions, and yet, they aren't giving us good opponents. They book us with guys who don't mean anything, and even though we're

champions, we never get into the main events." That was true.

Putting aside his attitude, I enjoyed teaming with Skip. In fact, outside of Tommy Rich, Skip was probably my favorite tag team partner.

When George Scott ran a territory, he insisted on having complete control over booking decisions, and from what I understand, the Von Erichs continually tried to undermine his decisions and change things to suit themselves. In August 1987, George saw the writing on the wall and decided it was time for him to leave the territory. George called and told me to stop by the office. Bruiser Brody also was there when I arrived. "Tony, I'm going to be leaving. Brody's going to take over the book. Don't worry, though. Nothing's going to change for you. Everything is cool. Brody will take care of you."

The following week, I made all the towns, just as I had when George was in charge. After that,

Brody quit booking me. The Dingo Warrior wasn't getting booked, either. Brody called me one day and said, "Come to Fort Worth on Monday. Don't worry. You've got a lot of bookings for next week." I guess he figured I wasn't going to show up, but I was broke. I was two months behind in my rent and I was about to be evicted. I explained my situation to Brody, saying, "If you don't want me, let me know. There are places I can go."

"No, no, no, no. Don't go nowhere, Tony. You're okay. We're just leaving you off things for a while so when you come back, you'll make a big splash. It's gonna happen in Fort Worth."

I was living in Eunice, Texas, so I drove to Fort Worth as he asked. When I got there, I was told I wasn't on the card. A wrestler named Eric Embry said, "Well, you've gotta talk to Brody. I don't have anything to do with the booking."

When I tried to talk to Brody, he ignored me. While I was standing there talking to him, he stood up and walked into a room with a couple of other guys and locked the door behind him. I began to pound on the door with my fists. "Bring your ass out here, Brody! I'll whoop you!" I was going nuts. Somebody finally went to get the police. They came into the dressing room and escorted me out of the building. I didn't resist. I didn't want any trouble with the law. Skip Young was surprised because, as far as he knew, I was the first person from whom Brody had ever backed down.

Brody never asked Skip and me to drop the tag team straps. Instead, Skip lost the title that night in a match against John Tatum and Jack Victory. While that was taking place, I was sitting in the dressing room. I went home that night, packed my gear, and got myself booked in Puerto Rico. I had been working there occasionally for the promoter, Carlos Colon, so it was an easy transition. At the same time, Dingo Warrior went

to work for the WWF as the Ultimate Warrior.

Brody and I patched things up a few months later when we were both working for another promotion. Brody walked into the gym where I was working out and came right over to me. "I'm sorry about what happened in Dallas," he said, "but I had nothing to do with it. You were our muscle guy, but Kerry was supposed to come back into the territory, so Fritz wanted me to begin phasing you out." Just as promoters didn't want to promote more than one black star at a time, they believed the same rules applied to bodybuilding types. I was in the same position as Kerry ... a muscle man. In those days, guys with deeply-cut, muscular bodies were few and far between. It isn't like it is today when most of the guys look like Hercules. Prior to the '90s, if you had a body, you were automatically in competition with anyone else who had a body. When I went to New York, I was in competition with Superstar Billy Graham and Hulk Hogan. Unless it was a tag team situation, the same rules applied to foreign

wrestlers. The promoters didn't feature more than one Japanese wrestler at a time. I wasn't in the WWF to see it, but I was told Mr. Fuji did everything in his power to get rid of Toru Tanaka because Fuji looked at him as his competition. Fuji also criticized Mr. Saito whenever he found the opportunity, and I was there when he did that.

One of the guys I remember from my time in the Texas territory was Eric Embry. When Skip Young and I were tag team champions, we had some classic matches with Eric and his partner, Dan Greer. If Eric was still working today, he would fit right in with the business. He was doing what they're doing today in the 1980s. He liked fast-moving matches which featured a lot of high spots.

I also got to know Killer Tim Brooks. Outside of Harley Race, Killer Brooks was one of the toughest SOBs you'd ever meet, but on the other hand, he was as nice as anyone. He was a rugged

man and a good worker. Whenever I watched him wrestle, he reminded me of Killer Kowalski. You couldn't lay down when you were in the ring with Killer Brooks. Once the bell rang, he was a perpetual motion machine. He didn't sell anything, either. He didn't have a muscular body, but he was solid all around. Taking hold of his arm was like grabbing a thick tree limb.

While I was in Texas, I was married to a girl named Lisa. I met her in New York in May 1984 when she walked up to me at our hotel and asked me for my room number. When I told her, she grabbed me by the hand, walked me to my room, and asked, "Where's your key?" I reached into my pocket, pulled out the key, and handed it to her. She opened the door, led me into the bedroom, took off my clothes (and her own), pushed me onto the bed, and climbed on top of me. It was as simple and as straightforward as that.

When I woke the next morning, she was gone. I

put her out of my mind and drove to Poughkeepsie, New York, for the TV tapings. A few minutes after I arrived, she walked right into the dressing room. Arnold Skaaland screamed, "Get her out of here!" and I hustled her out. For the next month, everywhere I went, she showed up. She was like the Meryl Streep character in the movie Fatal Attraction. I couldn't get rid of her. One of the guys walked into the dressing room in Madison Square Garden and said, "There's a woman outside who wants to see you." I couldn't believe my eyes when I walked out and saw her standing there. No matter where I went, if Lisa knew about it, she was going to be there.

I thought I might be able to run her off by sharing her with the other guys, but even that didn't work. I told her she could share a room with me and one of the road agents, but before I would have sex with her, she had to give my roommate a blowjob. She didn't hesitate. I'll never forget what happened. She liked to give a little hand squeeze while she performed oral. When she did,

the guy yelled, "Loosen up, cocksucker!" That was funny because that's what the boys said to each other in the ring when their opponent got a little stiff (no play on words intended), but it was the first time I heard one of the guys use that phrase during sex. I laughed so hard I fell out of the bed.

Lisa and I got married in New York after she told me she was pregnant. SD's wife, Kate, warned me not to do it. "But she says she's pregnant," I said.

Kate said, "That woman is about as pregnant as my son."

I didn't listen. After we got married, several months passed by. When I asked her why she didn't look pregnant, she said, "Oh, I had an abortion."

"You had an abortion?"

Sure, she did. She was never pregnant in the first place.

Before I met her, Lisa had been in the hotel room with Jimmy Snuka when his girlfriend, Nancy Argentino, died. Lisa also was dating Jimmy at the time. On the night of the incident, they had all been using cocaine. When their supply was gone, Jimmy sent Nancy out to buy more. When she returned, she said the dealer didn't have any. She could find more on the streets, but a lot of the drugs were tainted. She assured him that if he could wait until the next day, she could get him the good stuff. Jimmy went nuts. Lisa said he pushed Nancy backwards, causing her to fall and hit her head on a desk, resulting in injuries from which she later died. We all heard the story. Snuka doesn't remember it because he was in another world at the time. Lisa was really scared of Jimmy. She was afraid there might be reprisals because she had witnessed the incident.

Lisa and I were legally married in early 1985 shortly after I left the AWA and returned to the WWF. The wedding ceremony took place in New York and SD Jones was my best man. The

ceremony was conducted entirely in Spanish. I didn't understand a word anybody said. Whenever it was time for me to give a response to something the priest said, Lisa would squeeze my hand and I would say, "Si."

Lisa was a good woman. When we met, she was making $2,500 a month as a beautician and pedicurist. She worked for an exclusive beauty salon which was located to a studio where they filmed soap operas. At one time, Lisa had many famous celebrities as her clients, including Susan Lucci and Diana Ross. She gave up that job to be with me. Like most wrestling fans, Lisa thought I was a big-time wrestler who was rich and had everything going for him. It wasn't until after we were married that she realized I had serious problems, both personally and financially. When we got married, I was making decent money with the WWF, but when we moved to Texas, she realized my career was on a downward trend. Our apartment rent was $600 a month and I was only making $300 a week. She told me, "I'm not gonna

go down with you." I didn't blame her. She was a young girl who was trying to make her way through life. She had been brought up around successful people and wanted to be married to someone with high goals. She wasn't a gold digger. She was a businesswoman.

Lisa hated Texas in the worst way. She was scared to death of rattlesnakes and scorpions, both of which were abundant in the Lone Star state. She couldn't make a decent living there, either. After we divorced, she worked as a stripper at a place called Baby Dolls until she saved enough money to return to New York. When I ran into her in New York in 2000, she seemed happy to see me. She told me she had bought her own beauty shop and was doing well. I'm happy for her and wish her only the best.

Chapter 19
Bruiser Brody

I first met Bruiser Brody in 1975 when I was working for Dory Funk in Amarillo. I walked into the dressing room one night and Sputnik Monroe said, "Oh, just wait until Brody sees this one." He was talking about blacks. Sputnik said, "I bet he'll want to slap this one around."

When Brody walked into the room later that night, he stopped in the middle of the doorway and stared at me. The guys began to say things to him, egging him on, until he finally turned around and left. His face was bright red. After that, Brody would stare at me when I was working out in the gym. He saw me do three reps on the bench press with 550 pounds. I honestly believe that's the reason why he never messed with me. He knew how strong I was, and he wasn't quite sure whether or not he could take me.

The following year, in 1976, when Brody and Jose Gonzales were both working in New York for the WWWF, they wrestled at the Nassau Coliseum. Gonzales resented the fact that Brody

didn't sell anything for him. After the match, they got into a fight and Brody got the best of him, almost tearing off Gonzales' lip. Later, when SD Jones and I were leaving the arena, Jose was driving his car in circles around the parking lot and yelling out the window. SD stopped him and said, "Man, you've got to get to the hospital." While SD was driving him to the hospital, Jose said , "One day, I'm going to kill that son-of-a-bitch."

I had been going to Puerto Rico since 1984. In July 1988, I was booked there for a week, which was the usual amount of time we stayed. Lisa and I were still married at the time, so she went along with me on that trip. We stayed at her grandparents' house and they treated me like their own son.

Before 1988, wrestling in Puerto Rico had been one of the best experiences of my life. The boys all loved going there. When we were booked in Puerto Rico, we knew we were going to have a nice, relaxing time. It was like having a paid

vacation. Carlos Colon, the owner and promoter of the World Wrestling Council [WWC], paid well and picked up the tab for our hotel rooms. He even paid for the guys to bring their families with them. We spent a lot of time on the beaches. It was the next best thing to going to Hawaii. Our days consisted of getting up in the morning, going to the gym, lying on the beach, and going to the matches. The maximum length of the island is only 110 miles from east to west, and 40 miles from north to south, so the longest trip was two hours. After we wrestled, we would go to a nightclub, go to bed, get up, and start the day all over again. The food was inexpensive, but very good. We could buy a whole chicken for a dollar. The most expensive places were the American restaurants.

On July 15, 1988, the first night of the tour, Brody rode to the town with Jose Gonzales and Victor Quinones, two of the partners in Capital Sports, the Puerto Rican promotion. Jose also worked under a mask as the Invader. Apparently, sometime during

the 12 years following the incident in the WWWF, they had patched up their differences and were able to get along.

The next day, Saturday, I took Brody to the gym. During our ride there, he told me about the circumstances behind David von Erich's death. Later that night, we were booked in Bayamón, a city about 48 miles from San Juan. I was friends with the guy who owned a local gym and he took me to most of the towns. When I went outside to meet him, I saw Brody and Dutch Mantell sitting on the steps of the Panama Hotel. I said, "Brody, where's your ride?"

"Jose is supposed to pick me up."

"You're more than welcome to ride with me. I've got my buddy coming by to pick me up. I could tell the guy at the front desk to tell Jose that you already got a ride."

"Yeah, if you don't mind."

"No, I don't mind."

My friend's wife slid over next to her husband and Brody got into the front seat, while Dutch and I sat in the back seat.

It was a short trip to Juan Loubriel Stadium, so we were early, and the people were just beginning to file into the arena. When we walked into the dressing room, Victor Jovica, Carlos Colon, and Jose were sitting in the dressing room. They were huddled close together, as if they were discussing something they didn't want anyone else to hear.

I drew portraits of the wrestlers, so I had brought my art pad with me. I was drawing a picture of Mark and Chris Youngblood. Brody walked up, looked at it, and said, "Man, that's wonderful. I didn't know you could draw so great. It looks just like those guys. I'd like you to do one of my son. I had drawings done of him before, but it was a caricature and it don't look like him, but you know how to make the drawing look like the person."

While Brody and I were talking, Jose stood up and walked out of the room. Brody reached into his pouch to find a photo of his son from which I could work. When Jose came back, he had a towel draped over his hand. He stood in front of the doorway to the shower and said, "Brody. Mi amigo. Come here, por favor." With the photo in one hand, and his pouch in the other, Brody walked over and went into the shower stall with Jose. There was nothing unusual about that. When we had business to discuss, or when we would talk about our finishes with the bookers, we would often use the shower stalls as a private meeting place.

In a few minutes, we heard the sound of scuffling, and then we heard, "UUHHRRR!" It was loud enough that everybody in the dressing room stopped what they were doing and turned towards the shower. And then, more loudly, "UUUUUHHHHHRRRR!"

When I heard it the second time, I ran to the

shower and opened the door. Carlos was right beside me. That was when I saw Brody. He was bent over, holding his stomach. When I looked up, I saw Jose with the knife in his hand, as if he was getting ready to cut Brody. I grabbed Brody and pulled him back by the waist. As I did, Jovica shot in front of me, grabbed Jose, and pinned him against the wall. Then Brody looked up at me and said, "Brother, I'm hurt."

I pulled him back, laid him down on the ground, and straddled him. I said, "Don't worry, brother, ain't nobody gonna mess with you no more tonight."

When Carlos began to walk over, I threatened him. "Don't you come over here."

He said, "I haven't got nothing to do with that. That's between these guys."

Then I saw Jose walk out the door, unescorted and unrestrained.

As far as I know, the police never found the knife. When Jose walked out of the shower, he didn't have it. He didn't go back into the shower to get it, either. It just disappeared. I believe Jose passed the knife to Jovica when Jovica pushed him away from Brody. I also think Jovica pushing Jose away from Brody was a work, and they did it so Jose could pass the knife to Jovica. I base those suspicions on the fact that a couple of the guys said they saw Jovica walk out with it. I didn't see it because I was busy protecting Brody from anybody else who might try to get at him. Carlos said, "I need to talk to him."

I unstraddled Brody and let Carlos talk to him, but I kept a watchful eye on them. The only thing Brody said to Carlos was, "Take care of my son."

Carlos said, "Don't worry. I'll take care of your son."

Somebody had to call the radio station so they could announce we needed an ambulance. We

waited about 40 minutes. The Youngbloods were in tears. I was in tears. The rest of the guys were getting dressed, as if nothing unusual had happened. To them, it was just another night at the wrestling matches.

While we waited, we tried to talk to the security police on the scene, but they didn't speak English. They just looked at me with blank looks on their faces. I asked Roberto Soto to translate for me, but they just laughed, thinking it was just another wrestling angle. Roberto said, "I told them exactly what you told me." Finally, they turned and walked away from us.

The medic who showed up was a female and her assistant was an old man. They couldn't lift Brody, so I picked him up and carried him down the stairs to the ambulance. Nobody else made any attempt to help. The funny thing is, all the white guys were standing around and the one black guy carried him. When I lifted him up, he said, "Don't drop me brother."

I said, "Don’t worry, brother. I got you."

I jumped into the back of the ambulance when the medic asked, "Is anybody going to the hospital with him?" When I turned around, I noticed a friend of mine, Hurricane Castillo, Jr., standing by the rear door. I suddenly realized I needed an interpreter. In what was probably the greatest feat of strength I ever did in my whole life, I grabbed him by his shirt collar and lifted him bodily into the ambulance. His eyes were as big as two 50-cent pieces. I said, "Brother, I need you to talk for me."

He said, "Okay, I’ll talk for you."

I knew Brody liked country music, so during the ride, I held his hand and sang the old Hank Williams hit: If heaven ain’t a lot like Dixie, I don’t wanna go. If heaven ain’t a lot like Dixie, I’d just as soon stay home. If they don’t have a Grand Ole Opry, like they do in Tennessee. Just send me to Hell or New York City, it would be about the

same to me.

When we got to the hospital, they laid Brody on a table. I took his shoes off, and when I did, I could see that his feet were turning blue. At that point, I got hysterical and began looking for a doctor. There were stab patients all around the room. In Puerto Rico, they treat stabbing victims like they had a head cold because it happens so frequently, but I didn't know that at the time. We were always over in the tourist area where everything was beautiful. When I finally found a doctor, he said, "I'll be there in a minute."

I hammerlocked the doctor and took him with me. He said, "Let me go. Let me go."

"You're going with me."

When we walked up to Brody, the doctor said, "So, this is your friend?"

I said, "Yeah, this is my friend. Look at him."

The doctor spoke English, asking Brody, "How are you doing?"

Brody said, "I'm just sitting here waiting on you, brother."

With the doctor in control of things, I sat outside for a while. When a nurse came out and told me Brody was stable, I hailed a cab and went back to the stadium. When I walked into the dressing room, I couldn't believe how everybody was acting. The guys were all patting each other on the back, congratulating each other, and saying things like, "Good match, brother, good match." It was as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"Hey, are you going out tonight?"

"Yeah, we're going to this little Chinese restaurant."

"I heard they have great beer there."

That really shocked me. I said, "Don't you guys

know a man just got stabbed in here?"

Several years later, when I was homeless, I thought a lot about that. That could have been me. I could have been laying on the floor, bleeding to death, and the guys would want me out of the dressing room so they could lace up their boots and go over their match.

I had arrived at the arena just in time for my match. Dutch Mantell and I teamed up against Bobby Jaggers and Dan Kroffatt. The heels still didn't know anything about what had happened, so I told Jaggers and Kroffatt all about it while we were in the ring. After the match, they went back to the heel dressing room and gave the news to the rest of the heels.

Something else happened that night … something for which I have a hard time forgiving myself.

When I got back to the dressing room after my match, Carlos asked me for the name of the

hospital where Brody was. Now, since Brody had talked to Carlos earlier, I trusted Carlos, so I gave him the information. When he left, however, I had an uneasy feeling in my gut. I wondered if I had done the right thing by giving Carlos the information. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I felt like something just wasn't right about the whole scenario.

The next morning, Abdullah the Butcher walked up to me in the lobby of the Panama Hotel and gave me the news. Bruiser Brody had died on the operating table. The first thing I said was, "The doctor told me he was stable." The only reason I left was because the doctor told me Brody was stable. I have regrets about doing that to this day.

Later that day, while I was working out at the gym, I talked to a guy who worked at the hospital. Now this is hearsay, so I don't know if there's any truth to it whatsoever, but this is what he told me. While the doctors were working on Brody, security guards walked into the operating

room and told everybody to stop working on Brody and to leave. I said, "You're jokin'."

"Oh, no, no. We were told to stop operating on him."

The guy who told me that had no reason to lie … absolutely no reason.

The thing I regret the most was leaving the hospital. Brody had nobody to look out for him there. He was in the hospital, all by himself, and he had lost a lot of blood. Then, when the people who were behind his murder asked where he was, I was stupid enough to tell them. Perhaps I'm a sucker for conspiracy theories, but I always wondered why Carlos asked me for the name of the hospital. I thought he just wanted to go pay his respects. I assumed the problem was just between Brody and Jose. I never gave the first thought to the possibility that Carlos was involved, but due to the things that happened afterwards, I can't help but wonder.

One of the cops also talked to me at the gym that day. "I understand you came to the matches with Brody. It's a shame what that crazy fan did to him."

I said, "What?"

He said, "Well, we were told a fan stabbed him."

That was when I told them the whole story. That was my first opportunity to tell my side of the story to someone who would listen.

Later that morning, every non-Puerto Rican wrestler got together for a meeting. Abdullah, who had called the meeting, was in charge. He and Brody had been good friends and were very, very close. After a short discussion, we decided to boycott the show in Mayaguez that night. Several of the Puerto Rican wrestlers who hadn't heard the news made the trip to Mayaguez. Jose and Carlos were both there, but there weren't enough wrestlers to fill the card, so Carlos canceled the

show.

After the meeting, Sika, the Wild Samoan, told me, "Tony, you should go to the police station and tell what happened. I'll go with you." Sika was in the heel dressing room when the incident took place, so he didn't witness the incident, but I was happy that he wanted to come along. Having Sika at my side was as good as having a detachment of the U.S. Marines.

At the police station, I told them exactly what I had witnessed. They were shocked. It was the first time they had heard that story. One of the cops said, "That's strange, because Jose and Carlos said a fan stabbed Brody."

"Go talk to the wrestlers who were there," I said. "Brody and Invader got into it and Invader stabbed him." We were at the police station for more than two hours. They wanted to go over everything. Before I left, I gave them the names of the wrestlers who were there.

When the cops talked to the other wrestlers, they all said, "I don't know anything. I didn't see anything." They made me look like a liar. The only people who had a good view of what happened were the Youngbloods and Dutch Mantell, but strangely enough, the only person who saw what happened was Tony Atlas. Nobody in that dressing room, other than Tony, saw anything. The dressing room was full of people, but nobody saw anything! I was the only person in the dressing room that night who wasn't blind! I was in the room with a bunch of blind wrestlers.

That night, TNT [also known as Juan Rivera and Savio Vega] came to my hotel room and said, "Tony, you need to get out of Puerto Rico."

"I'm leaving tomorrow."

"NO! You need to leave right now. They're coming for you. You need to take the first flight out."

I don't know why TNT warned me, but I didn't ask any questions. I believed him. I knew Carlos had a lot of political clout on that island. Even if he didn't, for 20 bucks, they could have convinced any crackhead to knock me off.

When I told Lisa what happened, the first words out of her mouth were, "I hope you kept your mouth shut!"

I said, "No, I told them everything."

"Shit! You'd better get out of here."

"Okay. Get your things ready. It'll probably take us several days to get out of here."

She said, "No. You better get out of here. I'm not leaving my family just because you don't know how to keep your mouth shut."

I packed my bags and went to the airport. I packed my bags and went to the airport. I wasn't sure if I could get a last-minute flight out of Puerto

Rico, but one of the ticket agents found an empty seat for me. I didn't have too long of a wait, but at the time, it seemed as if I sat in the airport for hours. Every time somebody would walk towards me, I would think, "I wonder if Carlos sent him." I was on guard the whole time. When I got on the plane, I took a seat all the way in the rear. I didn't want anybody sitting behind me. Whenever anybody walked back to use the bathroom, I kept a watchful eye on them when they went in and when they came out. I was still working for the Von Erichs, so when I landed on Texas soil, I was one happy camper. Less than an hour after I walked into my apartment, Carlos called and said, "Brother, you deserted me."

I said, "Well, hell. Your best friend stabbed a man right in front of us. Do you want me to hang around and get stabbed, too?"

"Brother, nothing was going to happen to you."

"Well, how the hell was I supposed to know

that?"

That was the only time Carlos called me. He didn't ask me about appearing as a witness at Gonzales' trial. He just wanted to know why I left. He was worried that I would come back to Puerto Rico and cause trouble for him. He didn't know my financial situation. I couldn't afford a trip to Puerto Rico. If I had been wealthy, I might have hired a private investigator to look into the matter, but I didn't have the money for that.

Everybody knows that Jose did it for revenge. Everybody in the dressing room that night knew that. It was no big secret. However, when Brody's record (no doubt prepared by Carlos and Jose's attorneys) was presented to the judge at Jose's trial, he looked at the things Brody had done and said, "He was a bit of a loose cannon, wasn't he?" I'm sure those weren't his exact words, but the meaning is there. It's kind of hard to defend a guy like Brody, so Jose just pled self-defense.

I don't mean to speak ill of the dead, but Brody did step on a lot of toes. I read where Bill Watts said Brody was a whore who had no loyalty to anybody. In other words, if you work for a wrestling company, you're married to that company. It's like a marriage. When you cheat on that company, you're whoring around.

I'm not saying Gonzales was justified in doing what he did. Nothing justifies that. But in those days, it took several months to really get a wrestler over with the people. To reach those ends, a promoter invested a lot of time and money. Promoters put Brody over strong, and in return, they expected him to be loyal, but after getting a big push and being placed in main-event programs, Brody would leave to go work for another promoter without giving notice. That would be like me working for Vince McMahon one night, then going to work for another company the next. Brody had a lot of heat with promoters for doing that, but he was so strong and charismatic that they always brought him back.

The initial charge against Gonzales was first-degree murder, but it was later reduced to involuntary homicide. Several Puerto Rican wrestlers, including Gonzales' partners in the WWC, Colon and Jovica, testified on Gonzales' behalf and against Brody's character. Gonzales was acquitted on all counts when none of the American wrestlers present that night showed up for the trial.

There was only one person who stood up for Brody, and I see that person in the mirror every day. Everybody claimed to be his friend, but nobody else stood up for him. Nobody! Every babyface in the territory was in that room when Brody was murdered. And yet, when it was all over, everybody blamed me for Gonzales being acquitted. They said I should have gone back for the trial. Well, I had given my address and phone number to the police and told them to call me when a date had been set for the trial. Carlos had my phone number. I even called to Brody's wife, Barbara, to find out when the trial would be. They

all called me after the trial was over. They never called to give me a date beforehand.

Not surprisingly, the other guys who were in the dressing room that night all went back to Puerto Rico and made themselves some money.

What was so shocking was that Puerto Rico had been such a paradise for everybody. It was a place where we would have least expected anything of that nature to happen. I wouldn't have blinked an eye if it had happened in New York or Chicago, but not in Puerto Rico.

If Brody had lived, he had planned to go to Japan after leaving Puerto Rico. The story circulated that somebody was waiting for him there, too. If that was the case, if it hadn't happened in Puerto Rico, it most likely would have happened in Japan. I don't know how much truth there is to that story, but that's what people were saying.

Two days before he was murdered, Brody had

told me something I really didn't think about until after I returned home to the States. He said, "I just got in. It took me a while, but I got in." I knew he wasn't talking about wrestling because he had been wrestling in Puerto Rico since 1983, so what I believe he meant was that he had just bought into the company.

A short time before Brody died, I was supposed to wrestle Al Perez in Puerto Rico and Jose Gonzales wanted me to put him over. At first, I agreed to it, but being Tony Atlas, I began thinking about and said, "No, I'm not gonna do it." I made a lot of noise about not wanting to do it. I even made a statement to everybody in the dressing room: "Who is Jose to tell me to do a job? He doesn't do any jobs. Hell, my arms are as big as his whole body." Well, my comments made their way back to Jose, who eventually took me aside. We had a few words and Jose told me, "I'm not gonna fight you. I know if I fight you with my fists, I'm not gonna win, but I want you to know that if we get in a fight, I'm gonna win." The significance of what

he had said didn't really dawn on me until a few weeks after he put a blade in Brody, but I eventually realized that it could have been me. I finally gave in and put over Al Perez, but I kept mouthing off at Jose. I thought about that many times after Brody died.

I'm not sure if anyone else ever noticed this, but Jose had a certain way of moving in the dressing room. You could be sitting by yourself in the dressing room, when all of a sudden, you turn … and there he is. He moved very quietly and appeared like something out of the darkness, like something you'd see in a movie. He did that to me many times. I would be talking to one of the boys. I would bend down to pick up something … and there he was. He almost was like a ghost. That was something else I never thought about until later.

Being with Jose was akin to swimming with a shark. He looks so beautiful and so innocent … until he opens his mouth. That's Jose. And you

don’t see him until he wants you to see him. I never saw him walk into the dressing room. He just popped up.

Believe it or not, I went back and worked for Carlos Colon in 1992. Abdullah convinced me to do it. Things just didn’t feel right, though. When I walked into the dressing room, Jose Gonzales was there. He walked right up to me and shook my hand. No, it just wasn’t right. The next month, Carlos called to see if I would come back to do another show. He told me he could get young talent, but they just couldn’t work. His exact words were, "Those guys can’t work."

I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. Puerto Rico was no longer the wrestlers’ paradise that it had once been. I was leery of everybody. I couldn’t relax. I was looked at as the guy who killed the territory. More than likely, if it hadn’t been for me, the facts would have never gotten out. After the murder, they never did the business they did in the past.

For the most part, I wasn't criticized for going back to work for Carlos. Of the group of wrestlers who were there when Brody was killed, I was the last one to go back. I was the last of the Mohicans.

Chapter 20
Crossroads

Early in my career, Johnny Weaver told me, "You're going to make a lot of money, Tony, and you have two choices. You can live like a king, or you can live frugally and become a millionaire."

My choice was my ultimate downfall. Tony Atlas chose to live the life of a king.

Early in my career, I made an attempt to follow the financial guidance given to me by Johnny, George Scott, and Ole Anderson, but for some reason, when I began to work for the WWF, I disregarded all of their advice.

Many of us made money and the business was good to us. I made $1,500 during my first week in the business. How many kids with only a high school education, especially black kids who came from a poor family, were making $1,500 a week in 1975? How many kids are making $1,500 a week today, more than 35 years later?

Like the athletes in most professional sports, the guys who wrestled before the 1970s had it pretty rough. The money just wasn't there. But the years 1975 through 1985 were the best years ever for professional wrestlers under the old territory system. The money was better than it had ever been. Ole and Gene Anderson were making $2,000 a week in 1975. My first year in the business, I made $75,000. It was a wonderful time. All the territories weren't like that, though. Fritz von Erich was doing big business in Texas, and the guys there were lucky to make $500 a week on top. The territories which paid well were Atlanta, Charlotte, New York, Minneapolis, and Japan. I was fortunate enough to start in one of

the best territories around.

However, even though many of us made money, we didn't save our money. Part of the reason was because the guys who were tight with their money got teased and picked on. Some of the guys, however, were too cheap. At a restaurant, they would order a cup of hot water (free) and use ketchup (free) to make (free) tomato soup.

Johnny Weaver lived well, but he was very careful about how he spent his money. The boys used to make fun of him because he drove a Ford that didn't have a built-in AM/FM radio. He bought a cheap cassette player and played tapes he had recorded from the radio! He also bought standard tires without the whitewalls. He would buy a "new" car now and then when he needed one, but it was always a used car in average condition.

Ole Anderson was considered to be cheap. Ole drove a Plymouth convertible for many, many years. He kept it so long that the leather roof

rotted and fell apart. He came to the arena one night with a pair of boots that I had never seen before. "Ole! You broke down and bought some new boots!"

"Nah, somebody gave them to me because they bought new ones."

Ricky Steamboat, his wife Bonnie, and I went to eat at a Chinese restaurant. Ricky invited Randy Savage and Elizabeth to have dinner with us. Randy said, "No, that's okay. We have leftover pizza from last night up in the room." And he was making big money at the time!

Another time, Vince told me to get Randy for an interview. I opened up the door to his dressing room and I almost gagged on the smell from his sweaty clothes that rushed out of the room. He wore the same clothes and ring gear every day. Randy Savage and Nikolai Volkoff were both alike in that respect. Nikolai went to a restaurant in Germany with SD Jones and me. SD and I each

ordered a huge meal. Nikolai told the waiter, "I'm not eating. I'm just here to be with my friends." When it looked like we were getting full, Nikolai said, "If you're not going to eat that, I will!" He did that all the time. He would sit at a table and eat other people's food. He wouldn't buy anything, though. That's how cheap he was.

Before we left Germany, several of us went out to buy stuff for our wives. Nikolai said, "I'd like to go, too." We couldn't believe it. When we got back to our hotel, we all had big bags full of gifts for family and friends, but Nikolai only had one small bag. We thought that perhaps Nikolai went overboard and bought his wife a diamond necklace, or another piece of jewelry. He said, "You can't call me cheap any more! I bought my wife something!" He pulled out three postcards.

Nikolai always cooked in his hotel room on a hot plate, rather than go to a restaurant. One night after a show at Madison Square Garden, the Iron Sheik was rushing to the bar. He had brought the medals

he won in the 1968 Pan American Games and 1971 AAU national championship and left them in his car. When he returned later that night, the medals were gone. Somebody had stolen them. Nikolai seemed to be distraught. We thought he was upset for his friend, the Sheik, until he said, "Sheik, I don't know why you're so upset about losing you medals. They stole my hot plate."

I traveled with Bill Silverman, one of the WWF's referees. He was cheaper than anyone I ever met in the business. Since I was making good money, I paid for the gas and the food. Bill didn't have to pay one cent. There are a lot of tolls on the Garden State Parkway. At the very last toll booth, I told Bill, "All I have left is a fifty-dollar bill. I don't want to break it to pay a thirty-five-cent toll. Can you take care of this one?"

"Oh, sure, T!"

He gave me the 35 cents. Later that night, while I was selling my pictures, I noticed Bill staring at

me from the dressing room door. I couldn't figure out what he was doing. Finally, he walked over to the table and whispered in my ear, "Hey, T. Do you have that thirty-five cents?"

That was after I paid for the gas and every meal!

When somebody rode with me, I would pay for the gas, the food, the tolls, and at times, even the hotel. I didn't do that early in my career because the Crocketts helped me manage my money. They gave me enough money to live on and put the rest into a savings account in my name. They began that practice after I went to Roanoke one night with $3,000 in my pocket. I gave everybody in the dressing room a $100 bill. By the time the weekend was over, my pockets were empty. I had given away every penny of that money.

On Thanksgiving, I would load up my car with turkeys and distribute them through my old neighborhood. I went home to Roanoke during the Christmas holidays and took $3,000 with me. I

walked through the neighborhood and handed money to everybody I knew. I had to call George Scott to have him send me $100 to buy a bus ticket back to Charlotte. He thought I had gone nuts, but people always said I never forgot where I came from. I bought food for the guys, paid their bills, loaned and gave them money. I would buy an expensive gold chain, and while I was talking to someone I had never met before, I would take off the chain and put it around their neck. For some reason, I wanted to be a big shot in black neighborhoods. That was my turn-on. I would walk into soul food restaurants and pay everybody's tab.

Charlie Cook came to me many times and asked to borrow money. I used to tell him, "Charlie, you can't borrow money from me. You can have it. You don't have to pay it back. I hear that causes enemies. If you ain't able to pay it back, that leaves you and me as enemies. I want to keep our friendship, so if you need help, I'll help you by giving you money, but I won't loan it to you."

Ole used to get mad at me for giving away my money. He would say, "Look after yourself, kid." He told me that all the time. "Look after yourself, kid." And he wasn't always talking about money when he said that. I had a lot of clout because I was drawing money, so I would go to the office and fight everybody's battles for them. Whenever somebody had a problem, they would go to Tony, and Tony would go to war for them. Everybody's problems. At the same time, my own problems were accumulating. When it came time to face my problems, there was nobody there to help Tony, and Tony didn't know how to help himself.

One of the reasons why I was broke when my career began to wind down was because I gave away most of my money. Ole, Gene, and George Scott all told me that, with my background being what it was, they couldn't understand why I was so interested in helping other people, even to the detriment of own well-being. There were two reasons. First, I believe it all boiled down to my

rebellious nature. I saw it as a time for me to do what I wanted to do, and not what my superiors wanted me to do. Second, I got such a joy from helping other people.

Ric Flair made a lot of money, but he spent it like there was no tomorrow. Flair would buy $300 tailor-made sport jackets and rip them up on television. He would spend $300 a night in the bars. He bought Rolex watches and diamond rings. I remember riding with Flair one night in 1977. He had just paid $5,000 for a diamond ring that had a four-karat diamond. At today's prices, the ring would sell for upwards of $15,000 to $20,000. As we drove down the highway, we were having a competition to see who could hit a sign with their empty beer bottle. When he threw one bottle, the ring came off and flew out into the darkness of the ditch on the side of the road. We drove back and searched every inch of that ditch, but we never found it.

I heard stories about the old-timers, like Jerry

Graham, who would light cigars with $100 bills. When I was in the Carolinas, Johnny Valentine was making a lot of money. His smallest year was probably about $120,000. That was his smallest year. We didn't think about anything. We spent money just as fast as we made it.

I remember one time when I was living in LA. My girlfriend wanted to go out that night. She said, "Instead of sittin' at home, let's go out somewhere."

I checked my wallet and found $300. I said, "Shoot, I only got three hundred bucks. Where in the hell are we gonna go with this?"

It's amazing how your perspective changes with your circumstances. Three hundred dollars was nothing to me. "I can't go nowhere! I'm broke."

George Scott told me, "How could a person like you, Tony, who came up so poor, have such little regard for money?" He just couldn't understand it,

but that's the way things were back then. The boys didn't like the guys who saved and protected their money. They used to make fun of them. You got ribbed a lot if you tried to save your money. "Oh, you're cheap. You've got the first nickel you made."

I had many opportunities to invest my money and possibly secure my financial future. In 1978, when we were making so much money in Charlotte, Blackjack Mulligan and I decided to split the cost of a private plane and fly to Roanoke, rather than drive. As we flew over a farm, he told me, "You're making good money, Tony. You should buy that farm and give it to your mom. She has two boys at home who could help her." Walter and Charles were still at home. He said, "When you retire, you'll have a place to come home to. And who knows? Someday, a big company might want to buy it from you."

I didn't buy that farm, but I paid a visit to Roanoke a few years ago. Developers have built a

shopping mall where that farm once stood. If I had listened to Blackjack, I could have owned that property, and possibly sold it for a huge profit.

Later, when I was in Atlanta, several of us bought new cars. We were all living at the Passport Inn and we had been having a very good year. Waldo von Erich bought a 1950 Rolls Royce (and later sold it for three times what he paid). Mr. Wrestling #2 bought a 1957 Thunderbird for $7,000. Paul Jones bought a black 1955 Thunderbird for $8,000. Tito Santana told me, "Tony, I'm driving up to Marietta. They're selling condos for thirty thousand dollars apiece. If you want, I'll make the down payment on a couple of them for you."

I told him I would think about it, then went out and bought a 1977 Lincoln Town Car. Three years later, I sold that car for $6,000. At the same time, the value of Tito's condos had appreciated to $65,000 each. Tito later sold one of his condos for $275,000. Today, you can't touch anything in

Marietta for less than 300 grand.

People always want to blame someone else for their misfortunes. Every day, we come to crossroads. If we make good decisions, we do well. If we don't, we have to live with the consequences. Regardless, the decision is ours, and we're in control of making them. When I had a choice to buy a farm, or to be a big shot, I chose the latter. I made the choice. When I had a choice of buying a condo or a fancy car, I bought the car. When I had to choose between getting the WWF tag team title belts, or getting walked on, I chose to get walked on.

None of us handled our taxes well, either. That's the main reason why many of the guys ended up broke. We didn't report our taxes correctly, or we forgot to report them at all, so the government took whatever we had in the bank. If we didn't have enough money to cover what we owed the government, a lot of the guys were forced into a payment plan. One time, I had $35,000 in my

checking account. When I tried to cash a $2,700 check, the teller told me I couldn't access my funds. The government had placed a lien on my account until I paid my taxes. We were having such a good time that we forgot about taking care of business.

I really didn't understand the value of money during that time. A good example of my ignorance was when I was driving around with SD Jones one afternoon. He looked at the seat of my car and asked, "What are all those checks for?" I had nearly $16,000 worth of checks that I hadn't had a chance to put into the bank. We were so out of touch that when we did go to the bank to cash our checks, we didn't know how much they were for, and we accepted whatever the teller put in front of us. The value of money meant nothing to us.

The funny thing is, the promoters loved to keep us broke. If we had money, we became independent, so they loved to see us spend it so freely. They knew that as long as we were broke, they had

control over us.

Chapter 21
"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

After leaving Puerto Rico, I went back to work for World Class Wrestling in Dallas. Things didn't go too well there. Gary Hart, who had taken over the book from Brody, was good friends with King Parsons, another black wrestler, so he gave Parsons the push. As I've repeated several times before, generally, there is room for only one black wrestler in a territory, and on that occasion, I drew the short straw. During my first week back, I worked four shots and was paid $300 for the week. I couldn't live on that.

I was really destitute during that time. Lisa and I were already divorced, but she was still working as a stripper. She knew I wasn't working, so she

brought me food and gave me money for my bills. I have to give the girl credit. When things got rough for me, she came back to make sure I was safe. Then again, part of the reason I was broke was because she took all my money, but she still was concerned about my well-being. As I said earlier, Lisa was a businesswoman. When she saw me going downhill, she refused to go down with me. She felt like she deserved the money she took from me. Just before our divorce was finalized, she told me, "I could have made this money on my own, but I trusted you to make it for me." I've had some weird relationships.

I eventually got in contact with Mario Savoldi, who owned the International Championship Wrestling [ICW] promotion in Maine. I had worked for him before. Mario said, "You won't make big money up here, but you can make anywhere from five hundred to fifteen hundred dollars a week. I can guarantee you three hundred dollars a show."

Mario said he was running about three shows a week in Maine: Bangor, Augusta, and Portland. At $300 a show, I would be making $900 a week. I could live on that. He said I could expect to make more if business picked up. Vic Steamboat, the real-life brother of Ricky Steamboat, and Jonathan Boyd were on the same flight to Maine. At first, we made pretty good money, but when Mario began promoting at the Civic Center in Augusta, Vince, Jr. came in and promoted shows against him, which ultimately him out of business.

I met Paul E. Dangerously when I was with ICW. I was at Gleason's Gym in Brooklyn one day when he gave Gleason some lip about something. Gleason and two of his boxers were going to throw Paul E out the window of the five-story building. I really don't think they would have gone through with it, but they seemed to be serious. I ran over and got between them. After everybody cooled down, Paul and I walked away. He said, "I've got this great idea for you, Tony. I'm getting ready to start my own

promotion. We're gonna have a tag team called Public Enemy. It will be an Italian, a white, and a black."

He was going to put me with Public Enemy as their manager. He gave me his phone number and said he'd be in touch. Months later, when I was at home one night, I turned on the TV and saw the ECW show … and a tag team called Public Enemy. Paul E never called me. Of course, Paul E later jumped ship and went to work for Vince, leaving his talent with worthless checks and promises of payment that would never be honored.

In 1989, Mario Savoldi took me to a convention where promoters go to sell their show. While we were there, I met Dionne Warwick, Joan Rivers, Geraldo Rivera, Lou Rawls, Robin Leach, Kenny Rogers, Frankie Avalon, Michael Landon, and Oprah Winfrey. Hulk Hogan and Wendi Richter were also there. You don't hear much about Wendi any more, but at the time, she was quite popular. There were more people queued up at

her table than there were at Hogan's.

I was at Madison Square Garden on November 25, 1985 when they took the WWF women's title from her. They booked her against a masked wrestler named the Spider Lady. What she didn't know was that the lady underneath the mask was the Fabulous Moolah [Lillian Ellison]. Moolah, who had been in the wrestling business since 1949, was 62 years old at the time, but she was one tough lady. Just six minutes into the match, Moolah maneuvered Wendi into a pinning position. The referee gave Wendi a quick three-count and awarded the title to Moolah. Wendi stormed to the back and cursed out Vince, calling him every name in the book and a few that have never been published.

We were good friends. I used to travel with Wendi because nobody else would. I didn't have a credit card, but she did, so she would rent the car and I would drive. I always wanted her to walk on me because she had a size 10 shoe. She never did,

but she thought it was funny.

The first time I traveled with Wendi, I took my bag down to the lobby. Being a southern gentleman, I decided to wait by the elevator so I could help her with her luggage. When the elevator door opened, she was standing there with three or four suitcases at her feet. The funny thing was, she always traveled with a lot of luggage, but she wore the same clothes every day. When I finished putting her bags into the trunk, there was no room for anything else, so I had to put my bag in the back seat. Unfortunately, she had stuff in there, too. You had to wait on her, too. I used to joke that if you wanted Wendi to meet you at three o'clock, you'd better tell her to be there at one.

She's was a great girl, though, and a classy lady. As a wrestler, she was well-trained by Moolah. In her day, it was hard for the girls to keep their respect because the boys were so promiscuous during that time. As soon as a girl fooled around with one of the boys, she lost the

respect of all the boys, unless she got married to one of them, like Penny Banner did with Johnny Weaver, or Woman did with Kevin Sullivan. But if one of the girls dated one of the boys, they were looked at like they were an arena rat. Wendi always demanded respect, not only for herself, but for all women wrestlers. Wendi came into the business when the era of true "women's wrestling" was coming to an end. Today, the women in the business are called "divas." Wendi was a diva in her own right, but she was first and foremost a wrestler. In many ways, her career marked the end of an era.

Mario Savoldi wasn't running as many shows as he had claimed during our initial conversation. After a few weeks, I was working once or twice a month. Eventually, that dried up, as well. I was stuck in Maine with no money, no job, and nowhere to go.

Even though I was in my late thirties, I knew nothing about the real world. I didn't know how to

cope with life on my own. My mother took care of me when I was a child. I spent some of my childhood at the Baptist Children's Home and the Reception and Diagnostic Center. During my teenage years, I lived with Loretta Myers. I always had someone else to provide a roof over my head. From high school, I went straight into professional wrestling, where I guided by promoters and the boys. When I moved to Maine, I had to fend for myself for the first time in my life. And for the first time in my life, I was out of the wrestling business with no options.

I was about 19 years old when the wrestling business adopted me. From age 19 until age 40, I didn't do anything but wrestle. Nothing else. Imagine putting someone in the penitentiary when he was 19 years old and letting him out at age 40. What would he be good for? Nothing. Not only that, but he would be so far behind in everything. When I went into wrestling, everything was done with typewriters. When I came out, typewriters were

yesterday's technology and computers had taken over the world. Technology had moved on. In other words, we (wrestlers) were taken out of the real world and put into a fantasy world. When we got kicked out of the fantasy world and were put back into the real world, most of us didn't know where to turn. In the old days, a lot of the guys didn't have to worry about that because the promoter looked out after them. They kept them around as managers, agents, or referees. They could always find work doing something in the wrestling business. During my early years in the business, I sat in the dressing room with a lot of guys in their fifties, but you won't ever see that again. The age limit for most of the guys today is 35, at which time they're out of the business.

For the next six weeks, I was homeless. I slept in parks and on street corners. I was the "ICW heavyweight champion" and I was sleeping in the park! The temperatures dropped down to zero degrees and it snowed constantly. I would make a shelter like the Eskimos do. I would dig a hole in

the snow underneath a park bench, pile the snow around the bench, and crawl underneath. That was the best I could do to create a small semblance of warmth and security. That year, I spent Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays underneath a bench.

I did a lot of drugs during the time I was homeless, but I didn't use them because I wanted to get high. I remember sitting on a park bench at two o'clock one morning. I was shivering with the cold and my teeth were chattering. I noticed people walking by who were wearing nothing but thin jackets and light sweat suits. I thought to myself, "How in the hell do those people stay warm?" When I followed them to see where they were going, I saw them go into a house ... a house we would call a "crack house" today. I don't think crack cocaine was around at the time, but people smoked cocaine. It was called "freebasing." When I walked into the house, a guy noticed me shivering. He said, "if you want to get warm, give this a try."

"I'm not sure I wanna do that," I said.

Somebody else said, "Oh, come on, man. It won't hurt you. Just try it one time. If you don't like it, don't do it no more."

Against my better judgment, I took a deep drag from the pipe someone handed me. All of a sudden, I began to feel warm. I felt energetic. I was no longer cold. I wasn't hungry, either. I don't want anyone to think I'm promoting drugs when I tell this story because I'm not. I'm not proud of my drug use. But if it hadn't been for the drugs, I don't think I would have made it. More than likely, I would have frozen to death. The drugs sped up my metabolism, which helped me generate body heat which kept me going.

After that, I lived in abandoned houses used by the drug dealers. I didn't have money to buy drugs, so the dealers would have me hang around as protection. At the end of the night, they would give me a free bag as payment for my services. I never

had to worry about accidentally overdosing because I could only afford just enough to keep me warm in the winter.

Sleeping in the houses was better than living outdoors, but the buildings were still cold. One house caught on fire while we were getting stoned. We were in one room while another room was going up in flames. We didn't leave as soon as we realized the house was on fire because we wanted to finish what we were doing before we left the building.

One of the worst things I heard about took place during that time at a place we called "Knox Street." I wasn't there to actually see it, but a prostitute named Ebony told me about it. A group of drug dealers turned a 16-year-old girl named Angie into what we called a "coke whore," or a woman who trades sex for coke. When the dealers finished with her, they told her to leave and turned her out onto the streets. I felt badly for her, so I took her to the National Guard Armory where I

knew one of the recruiters. He took pity on her and invited her to stay with him and his wife until she was old enough to join the National Guard. He was a man with good intentions and no ulterior motives. His wife even took her shopping and bought clothes for her. She stayed for a few weeks, but disappeared one day and went back out onto the street. She immediately went to one of the houses to see if she could get some cocaine. While she was there, five or six police cars pulled up to raid the building. At the urging of one of the dealers, she swallowed five or six bags of coke so the police wouldn't find them. After they left, she tried to induce vomiting to retrieve the bags, but they refused to come up. Her only alternative was to pass the bags by using the bathroom, but that was going to take time ... and the dealers were not going to wait. They pinned her to the floor of the house and cut open her stomach with a razor blade. They removed the cocaine and left her to bleed to death. By the next morning, the body was beginning to smell, so they dumped it into a nearby canal. When I saw her picture in the newspaper a

few days later, I went to the police and told them the story that had been told to me by Ebony, who was in the room when it happened. At the time, a bag of cocaine sold for about $40, so Angie died for a measly $120 worth of drugs.

I became very depressed during that time. I had lost my family and job and I didn't have a penny to my name. People don't really stop to think about what it means to be homeless. I didn't take a shower and I wore the same clothes for almost a year. I stayed alive by digging through dumpsters behind fast-food restaurants and eating hamburgers and pizza that had been thrown out. One time, I noticed a man watching me as I climbed out of a dumpster. The next day, the dumpster had a lock on it. That really made me mad. I tried my best to break the lock, but I didn't have any success. I slept on park benches and in abandoned houses. If I found a car that had been left unlocked, I would crawl in and go to sleep. I eventually reached a point where I considered suicide.

The time I spent on Knox Street was the worst time of my life. Fortunately, I was only there for two weeks. While I was sleeping under a park bench, an angel came down from Heaven and rescued me.

One morning, a lady was bringing groceries home and sat down on a bench to rest, not realizing I was sleeping underneath. I wasn't in a good mood, so when the bench moved, I crawled out and bumped into her legs. It scared her, but in my opinion, she was an angel who had been sent from Heaven to save me. Her name was Monika De Rance. After we talked for a few minutes, she said, "If you don't have a place to sleep, you can stay at my place." It was just like that. "You can stay at my place." I went to her house and slept on a mattress on the floor.

Before I went to Monika's house, though, she took me to the hospital. It was 22 degrees below zero that day. A doctor at the hospital told her if I had been outside for another hour or two, I would have

died. They put me in a bathtub and thawed out my body. That was the most pain I ever felt in my life. My body temperature changed so rapidly that I had a seizure and went into shock.

Monika was from Germany. She was born in Berlin in 1941 and grew up in the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. In 1964, she followed a black serviceman to America. What she didn't know was that he was already married. She flew all the way from Germany and showed up on his doorstep … with their child. Before his wife could see her, he put her on a bus and sent her to New York. Not able to speak English, and with a small child to raise, she had a hard time making a living. She worked low-paying jobs. Eventually, she began her own business as a seamstress and is now doing very well.

In late July 1990, I got a phone call from Ole Anderson, who was booking the Atlanta-based World Championship Wrestling promotion for Ted Turner. Cactus Jack [Mick Foley], who I had

talked with several weeks earlier on an ICW show, had given him my phone number. Ole wanted me to work for WCW. He had a big angle he wanted me to do with Ric Flair. Flair was going to do an interview and say something like, "There are no more good, black wrestlers. In fact, there never has been a good, black wrestler, and there never will be." At the time, they were still playing the black-white, racial issues in the south. To jump-start the angle, Ole wanted me to grow an afro and a beard, and to dye my hair gray so I would look old. He didn't want the people to recognize me. I would come to the arena and get into the ring during Flair's match. After press slamming him, I would pull off my shirt and reveal myself to be Tony Atlas.

At the time, WCW was handing out three-year contracts for $250,000 a year. Unfortunately, I made the fatal mistake of telling Mario Savoldi about the phone call. Mario was always trying to get in with Vince, so the first thing he did was call Vince and tell him about it.

Later that day, Mario called and told me he was coming by my apartment to pick me up. "Vince wants you to come work for him. You'll make a lot more money working for him than you will for WCW, so let's go talk to him before you sign a contract with WCW." Mario took me to Connecticut and, as we walked into the building, I saw Vince. He asked me to come to his office so we could talk about the possibility of me returning to the WWF. After talking to me for a few minutes, Vince offered me a big advance, pulled out his book, and asked, "When do you want to start?" He was ready to book me right then and there.

I said, "Ole wants to bring me to WCW."

He said, "We can do more for you here then they can do for you there. This is your home. The people here love you and you've made a home for yourself in Maine. You don't want to go back down south."

As I watched him write my name in his book, he

said, "We have to get you going right away." He then pulled a contract out of his briefcase and said, "I don't want you to sign this here in the office. I want you to have your lawyer look at it first." I thought it was interesting that he booked me before he had a signed contract, but I did what he asked and saw a lawyer.

As soon as I got home, I called Ole and told him I had taken a job with the WWF. When Ole finished cursing, he told me he was disappointed, but wished me well. Ole later brought in Junkyard Dog to do the angle, which didn't work for two reasons: First, and probably most important, the Dog wasn't the performer he had once been, and two, he still was strung out on drugs. I talked to Ole about it years later, and his exact words were, "He was still on the shit." The other reason was the angle had been designed for Tony Atlas. Ole knew it would work with Flair and me. He had a lot of confidence in me. In fact, years before Ron Simmons became the first black world champion, Ole had argued that I should have that spot.

When I returned to the WWE in August 1990, Vince, Jr. told me, "Tony, I want you to step back, relax, and let me do the driving." In other words, "Don't try to run my business for me. I know what I'm doing."

During the first three weeks, I worked against Haku and Barbarian. On August 30, I worked with Iron Mike Sharpe in White Plains, New York. Two nights later, I arrived in Warwick, Rhode Island, where I would be wrestling Sharpe once again. While I was putting on my ring gear, Chief Jay Strongbow walked in and said, "Vince wants you up in the office." Vince had a room he used as his office at every arena. When I went into the office, Vince told me about a new name they had for me: Saba Simba. What I didn't realize until that moment was the wrestling business had changed. Vince, Jr. made it a practice to change the name of every wrestler who came to work for him. He wanted to own the rights to the characters. That way, if somebody walked out on him, they couldn't use the name anywhere

else. Vince spent a lot of money getting the characters over, so he felt like the characters were his property, and rightfully so. The last thing Vince wanted to do was use "Tony Atlas" on his television program because he didn't own the rights to my name. I was Tony Atlas before I signed the contract, so he couldn't legally keep me from using the name Tony Atlas when I left.

In my opinion, unless he had a legitimate reason for giving me the Saba Simba gimmick (like teaching me a lesson in humility), that was the one mistake Vince made in his life. Saba Simba was supposed to be an African warrior. However, the fans looked at the gimmick as being racist and bigoted. I had my own problems with the character. I don't have anything against Africa, but I'm not African. I'm an American. I was born and bred in the United States of America. And even though I have always been willing to do whatever is asked of me, there was something inside me that rebelled. I just couldn't get into the character. I grew up on barbeque, blues and country music. I

felt like I was betraying my roots. On national TV, I felt like I was turning my back on America. Even the fans mentioned that to me. "You're Mister USA, Tony." To the people, I was a black Uncle Sam, and it was ridiculous for me to come out without my stars and stripes, without my red, white and blue. Instead, I was dressed like Kimala.

I wrestled as Saba Simba for five months. In January 1991, when my name wasn't on the booking sheet, I went into the cafeteria to talk with Vince. Black Bart must have been left off the booking sheet, too, because he was there when I walked in. He was pleading with Vince to let him keep his job. "I'll put up the ring. I'll be a referee. I'll do whatever you want. I have a mortgage and bills." Vince told Bart he would work on it for him. When Bart got up to leave, I walked up and asked Vince why I wasn't on the booking sheet. At the time, we would work 10 days straight, be off for four days, work four more days, then be off again. He told me I would get a new booking sheet. I flew home the next

day. When I walked into my home, my wife ran up and said, "You've got something from the office." Thinking (and hoping) it was a new booking sheet, I tore open the envelope ... only to find a note from Pat Patterson, the booker for the WWF. "Thank you very much for your loyalty to the company, but your services are no longer needed." Vince told me everything was okay on Wednesday, and on Thursday, I had been released. I was so stunned by the contents of the letter that it took a few minutes for the truth to sink in: the letter had been mailed before Vince had assured me that everything was okay.

One of the things that made the old-timers really mad was not being fired or released, but the way in which the promoters went about doing it. In the '70s and '80s, every territory gave a two-week notice, and often, the promoter would help us get booked somewhere else or give us a number we could call where we could get ourselves booked. The system is much better today. The WWE gives a three-month notice. If they decide to

release someone, they give them severance pay for three months. They can't work for anybody else, but that gives them three months to find work.

I received my final paycheck from the WWF in April 1991. I don't know for sure because I've never asked him, but I came to the realization that the only reason Vince brought me in was to keep WCW from having me. I believe he really didn't want me, but he didn't want them to have me, either. With that in mind, however, he also was reluctant to take another risk with me, and the best way to alleviate that was to bring in Tony Atlas, hang up the Tony Atlas character in the closet, and put Saba Simba in the ring. That way, if I were to give notice and quit, I would be unable to use the Saba Simba character anywhere else.

The one thing Vince forgot was they gave that character to an athlete. That was in 1991. Today, 17 years later, people ask me about Saba Simba. I only did the character for six months, and the people still remember it. For that reason, in my

opinion, the character worked. It didn't work in the respect that it drew money, because it really didn't. I was never put into a position to draw money with the character. It did work, however, because it connected with the fans. So Vince didn't get rid of it because it didn't work. He got rid of it because he had achieved his objective, which was to keep me from going to WCW. Regardless of whatever motives he might have had, I have to thank Vince for the opportunity because Saba Simba put me back on my feet. During that time, I worked hard to get my act together and I stayed away from drugs for two years.

Before I left the cafeteria, Vince had told me, "Sit tight and we'll be in touch. You will be back." I sat at home for five months and watched my savings disappear. It was early September 1992 before Vince called to say he had me scheduled to wrestle in Allentown on September 13, 1992. I was excited about getting back into action. I showed up, changed into my Saba Simba ring gear,

and went to the ring to do a job for IRS [Mike Rotundo]. That was my one and only booking. The only thing I could do at that point was to sit and wait for Vince to call as he had promised. Once again, he was true to his word. What I didn't know, however, was that when he said, "Sit tight and we'll be in touch," I didn't realize he meant it would be 14 years later. I wouldn't get that call until the year 2006.

By June 1992, when I realized I wasn't going to be called back, I decided I could no longer wait. I called Bill Watts to inquire about going to work for WCW. Bill wanted me to work with Ron Simmons in a program originally planned for Butch Reed. Reed no-showed a television taping in Macon, Georgia, just two weeks after he made his debut with the company. I got my first shot there on October 5.

Before I began working for WCW, Monika and I got married. She was afraid I would leave and not come back because there's a 14-year difference in

our ages. She couldn't have been more wrong. Besides the fact that I was in love with her, I owed her a lot. Even if I had managed to stay alive during my period of homelessness, if she hadn't taken me in, Vince wouldn't have had any way to get in touch with me.

My run with WCW was doomed from the start when they brought me in as a heel and teamed me with Barbarian. To add insult to injury, Bill Watts wanted me to call Ron Simmons names like "jungle bunny," "porch monkey," and things a white person couldn't get away with saying. Bill didn't understand that times had changed. His idea might have worked in the '70s, but in 1993, it wouldn't get over at all. Not only were the comments racist, but the whole angle was very demeaning to Ron. Ron had been the first black world heavyweight champion, and now they wanted me to humiliate him with shameful, stereotypical remarks. The strange thing about the whole situation was, before I ever got into the ring against Ron, they had me do jobs to everybody but the

referee. I was thinking, "Wait a minute. If I'm gonna fight a guy who used to be the world champion, how come I'm losing to everybody?" The saddest thing was, Dusty asked me to let Vinnie Vegas [later Kevin Nash] beat me in an arm wrestling contest on the Clash of Champions pay-per-view event. I told Dusty, "I'll job to anyone you ask, but all I have left is my strength. If I do this, I'm finished."

He said, "We're gonna do it left-handed to make it look better." When I balked at the idea, Dusty said, "It's a work, Tony. You still have your contract."

I gave in and did what he asked, even though I didn't want to. The next day, I found a letter in the mail from WCW. "Your services are no longer needed." It was one year, almost to the day, since I had received my termination letter from the WWF.

I can best sum up the years from 1989 through 1992 with the following statement: being homeless

was the best thing that ever happened to me. My "worst years" were my best years. They were my best because I learned a lot about life. Not the fairy-tale life I had lived since I got into the wrestling business, but real life. Losing everything I had almost was like being born again. I came out of that experience loving people, loving myself, and loving my family. My perspective of life was so very different from what it had been during my heyday.

When I was making big money, I only thought about Tony Atlas. There was a time when I would go to a gym and see someone doing a 500-pound bench press. I would walk over, tell him to add 50 pounds to the bar, and I would press it. I wanted the guy to know he wasn't the strongest person in the gym. Today, if someone does a 500-pound bench, I walk over, pat that man on the back, and say, "Man, that was a great lift. That's fantastic. You really are a great lifter." Even if I could out-lift that person, I would never let him know it. I would let him bask in his glory. Twenty

years ago, I would have shot him to the curb. I would have walked over and let him know, "Hey, brother. I'm the man, not you." Being the big-shot is no longer important to me.

Chapter 22
True Life

In May 1997, I was contacted by a man named James St. Jean, who had run a couple of wrestling shows under the "Eastern Wrestling Alliance" [EWA] banner. James, a physical therapist by trade, was the owner and president of the promotion. He had a partner named Bob Staples, a principal of a high school.

At the time, I was working as a personal trainer and at night clubs as a bouncer. When I had been on the road with the WWF and WCW, I would send money home to Monika. She saved every penny I sent, and when I left WCW for the final

time in 1992, she used the money to help me get certified as a personal trainer. I had a friend who was in charge of the juvenile department. He got me a job working with troubled teenagers in the youth program at the YMCA. They gave kids a choice of either going to the detention center or going to the gym to train with Tony Atlas. The program was called "Team Atlas."

Everybody always talks about minority kids and how rough they have it, and how they have no future. You don't hear about it on television, but kids of all colors have problems. While working with the kids, I learned there were a lot of white kids who had trouble, too, and I worked with kids of all races.

The daily classes were three hours long and the focus was on education, weightlifting, and discussion. The kids spent the first hour doing academic things like reading, drawing, or composing songs. The second hour was devoted to weightlifting. For the final hour, we all sat in a

huddle and had what we called the "family dinner table." After eating hot dogs, hamburgers, or pizza, we had "family discussion," during which time the kids would be allowed to express their problems. Nobody was allowed to criticize or ridicule anyone for something they said. They also had to use manners. We taught them to say, "Yes, sir," "No, sir," "Yes, m'am," and "No, m'am." We had 13-year-old boys saying "Yes, m'am" to 13-year-old girls. We wanted to teach them the things they needed to know to make it in the real world. They weren't allowed to butt into a conversation. They had to say, "Excuse me. I'm sorry for interrupting." Otherwise, we would ignore them. I was always preaching to the kids, so it didn't take too long before the kids all referred to me as "The Reverend." I would also go to schools and give motivational speeches about the power (or lack thereof) of education.

For a while, I worked as a trainer, and with the kids, at a gym called Flex Gym. While I was there, the owner, Dave Miller, began selling annual

memberships for $199. That was a very low price because everybody was paying $30 a month. Being handed an opportunity to save $160 a year, everybody in the gym jumped on the offer. After signing up as many people as he could, Miller sold the gym to a lady by the name of Jill, who put up her house as collateral for a loan to buy the gym. What she didn't know was Dave had sold discounted memberships to almost everyone who worked out at the gym and had kept the money. During her first year of operation, she brought in very few new memberships and had almost no income. The financial and mental stress was so great that she had a stroke. She was out of business in 12 months. When that happened, I moved "Team Atlas" to Gold's Gym. Shortly after the move, the owners of the gym changed the name to Fitness World in order to keep from having to pay for the rights to use the "Gold's Gym" name.

The "Team Atlas" program came to an end in 2008 when the management of Fitness World became aware of insurance liability issues. I'm

proud to say I had a high success rate of turning around the kids who participated in my program. Several of them went into the military, while others have stable jobs, are married, and have families. Just recently, a young man named Jason walked up to me on the streets of Lewiston and told me how I had changed his life.

When James St. Jean called, he said he had seen an article about me in our local newspaper, the [Lewiston] Sun Journal. When he asked me if I would be interested in being a part of his organization, I suggested we meet at the local Denny's restaurant to discuss details of the offer. At the meeting, he offered me the position of booker of the EWA promotion, which I readily accepted.

The EWA promoted matches at high schools, colleges, National Guard armories, and county and state fairs. Local cable companies taped our house shows and aired them on cable access stations in Maine. We didn't have any funds in our budget for

post-production or editing, so I scripted everything like they did in the days when the promotions filmed their shows in TV studios.

In my opinion, EWA was one of the most well-run independent shows ever. Before each match, I went over the finish with the guys, mainly to be sure they weren't planning a long, drawn-out finish. If I told the guys I wanted a five-minute match, their match had to end on time. When it was time for them to go home [end the match], I signaled them by standing where they could see me and taking off my hat. Today, the referees have microphones in their ears so the control room can tell them when it's time to go home, but I didn't have the money or the technology. Most of the time, the guys did what I asked because they knew if they didn't, their match would be erased immediately. We weren't going to go over the time I had allotted for the spot. On the rare occasion when that did happen, I sent two other wrestlers to the ring and they wrestled for the correct amount of time. When the tape was pulled

from the camera, it was ready to go.

While trying to get a night job as a bouncer to make some extra money, I talked to a bar manager. He said, "We already have a bouncer. She doubles as our bartender."

I said, "She?" Just as soon as I said "she," a girl standing in front of the bar decked a 200-pound man and dragged him out the door. I don't know what he did to make her hit him, but once I got to know her, I realized it didn't take much. She was a rugged girl who grew up with a bunch of brothers and didn't take any crap from anybody. Her name was Sandy Roy, a female bodybuilder who won the Miss Maine title twice. As she walked back into the bar, I had a sudden flash of inspiration. She would make a great women's champion. After I trained her, we called her "Master Sandy." We did good business while she was with us.

My goal with the EWA was to produce a family-

oriented show. We were violent and we bled, but we avoided anything that might have sexual overtones. The girl wrestlers wore one-piece bathing suits and stockings. For instance, in the old days, Ole Anderson told me, "If you get kicked in the nuts, grab your stomach, not your crotch. There are kids in the audience."

I also tried to make people aware of social issues by touching on them in my angles. At the time, a lot of people were talking about spousal abuse, so I thought I could use that to get Sandy over. I did an interview talking about how my dad used to beat my mother and how I would never hit a woman. When Sandy challenged me for the EWA title, I refused to wrestle her. She slapped me, hit me, and did whatever she could to make me want to fight back. Finally, in August 1998, five of her bodybuilding friends (males) attacked me and softened me up enough to where Sandy could bodyslam and pin me to win the EWA title.

I also brought in a guy named Dave Webber. I

gave him the name "Dave Vicious" because he looked a lot like Sid Vicious. Dave got his training at Killer Kowalski's school when Triple H and Chyna were training there. Dave proved to be very popular with EWA fans, and at one time, the WWF showed some interest in him, but something happened and he didn't go. We used Master Sandy as his manager. In the ring, he was big and intimidating, but in real life, he was soft-spoken and he had a heart of gold. Dave and I had a special bond because we had several things in common: we both had a passion for working with young people and we were both pencil sketch artists. I'm sad to say that on March 16, 2001, Dave was found lying in his driveway, dead of an apparent heart attack. He was only 32 years old when he died.

For the first six or seven months, James St. Jean followed my advice and we did really well. Independent talent began calling me from all parts of the northeast and I brought in former WWF stars. Our troubles began when James and Bob

brought a kid named Joshua Shea on board to help with administrative details. As part of his school curriculum, Shea, a student at Bates College, had done a three-month apprenticeship as a writer with the WWF. He began sending crazy ideas to James and encouraging him to add more "storylines" to our programs. I wanted to stay away from storylines. We had been fairly successful by taking an "old-school wrestling" approach because that was what most of our fans remembered, and those who weren't old enough to remember "old school" were soon won over to our style. WCW, ECW, and the WWF were all doing storylines and I knew we couldn't compete with them, so I thought the best way to get attention was to give people hardcore wrestling with a lot of action. Mixed martial arts has been very successful, and they give their fans action, not storylines.

Regardless of the success we had seen in the previous months using my ideas, James began listening to Josh and implemented some of the storylines he presented. James would call and

wake me up at eleven o'clock at night. I'd say, "James, where'd you get that idea?"

His answer was always the same: "Josh."

When James and Josh made the move to a "storyline" format, business began to drop. Josh wanted nothing to do with old-school wrestling. He focused on presenting the same kind of programming the WWF offered. Nobody can compete against the WWF on their own field. Anybody who tries is going to be looked at as nothing more than a copycat, and in most cases, a poor copy of the WWF. But Josh wanted to do it in the worst way. I kept telling James, "Look, James. The houses are growing. We're making money. Why change? We can't compete against Vince." He wouldn't listen, and for the remainder of my time with the company, I spent the better part of my time butting heads with Josh.

One day in 1999, James got a call from the MTV cable television network. They told him they had

heard about his promotion and wanted to tape a three-part documentary about pro wrestling with EWA as the feature promotion. We were lucky to get that gig. The producers had originally called King Kong Bundy for the part. His only response to their overture was, "How much money does it pay."

They said, "There's no money, but you'll get a lot of publicity."

He said, "Then go screw yourself," and hung up on them. The producers then called Les Thatcher to ask if he knew anyone else who might be interested and he gave them my phone number.

James didn't know what to tell the people from MTV, so he said, "You'll have to talk to Tony Atlas." When they called, I invited their production crew to join me in Maine where they could film three wrestling shows. We had two small shows, one in Concord, New Hampshire, and the other at the convention center in Lewiston,

Maine. The third show, which would be our big show, would be held at Springfield College in Springfield, Massachusetts.

During the weeks leading up to the shows, I got a lot of calls from independent wrestlers who wanted to be on our show because they had heard about MTV's plans to be there. When I told them the show was already booked solid, they did a run-around and called James, who said, "I'm not sure whether or not we can work you in, but come on down and we'll see what we can do." When I walked into the dressing room in Concord, I looked around and saw people I had never seen or heard of in my life. I had my booking sheet with me and I knew exactly who was supposed to be there. I asked James, "Who are all these people?"

I didn't want MTV to film the same guys every night. I wanted to give an opportunity to as many guys as possible, so I booked 12 wrestlers for the show in Concord, 12 different wrestlers for the show in Lewiston, and more than 30 guys for the

big show in Springfield. I only wanted King Kong Bundy for the big show. I didn't want him for the first two shows because he wanted $600 for each show. I'm not saying he didn't deserve that much, but I couldn't afford it. The Patriot [Tom Brandi], who was wrestling Dave Vicious in the main event on all three shows, only asked for $200 a show. I gave him $300, so he would have made $900 for the three nights. Dave was getting a $100 payoff and everybody below that was going to make $50.

Our budget for the three shows was $7,000, so I planned to spend $2,000 per show. That would leave me $1,000 for any extra expenses that might come up. At the end of the first show, the payout to my talent was $3,500. I told James, "We're way over budget. If we keep this up, we're not gonna have enough money to run the next two shows. We're already $1,500 over budget."

The talent all came up to me and said, "Tony, we'll work for free. You don't have to pay us. We just want to be on MTV." They didn't care

about the $50 payoff. They just wanted the national exposure.

After the show, I told the MTV crew, "We're doing TV tomorrow. There will be several matches which will run about four or five minutes each, so you'll see a lot of action."

They said, "Okay. We'll see you then."

My telephone rang at six o'clock the next morning. It was James. "The show tonight in Lewiston is canceled," he said.

I said, "You're kidding me."

"No, the show is canceled."

I asked, "Well, did you tell the MTV people?"

He didn't answer my question, but he said, "We don't have enough money to run the show."

I said, "Look, James. The building and

everything else is paid for, and the guys said they'd work for free."

"Oh, fuck that. The show is canceled." He hung up on me.

Later that day, the gym where I worked out had a "Tony Atlas Bench Press Contest" scheduled, a charity contest I sponsored annually for about 10 years with the proceeds going to the fire department. MTV was filming the contest, so while I was telling the MTV cameraman what James had said, George Graffam, a referee and good friend, came up and said, "Tony, the ring crew is setting up the ring."

I said, "Oh, really? Didn't they get the word that the show had been canceled?"

"No, they didn't."

The guy from MTV jumped in and said, "Tony, you should just run the show yourself."

I thought that was a good idea and I went to the building that night with the intention of running the show. However, the business license and the building contracts were in James' name and he wasn't willing to let me run the show. He even called the athletic commission and told them I intended to run without a permit.

The talent booked for Lewiston had stayed over the night before at a hotel in Lewiston called the Chalet. The guys were really disappointed because they had really been looking forward to showing their talents to a national audience. I had talent who drove all the way from Nova Scotia and Montreal to be on the show. When I realized James wasn't going to let me run the show, I went to the hotel and gave all the money I had to Tom Brandi. "Pay all the boys for the three days." James drove up about that time and began cursing at me. He said he would take me to court. I ran towards him and he jumped back into the car and left. When I told the MTV cameraman what James had said, he told me, "If you have to go

to court, give me a call. I have it all on tape."

Bundy managed to get himself booked on another show, but before he left, he told James, "You owe me six hundred dollars."

The final show at Springfield College was the show that MTV really wanted to film. The people in charge of publicizing the event didn't advertise "professional wrestling." They advertised an appearance by MTV. Just about every kid at that college wanted to be there because MTV would be there with their cameras rolling. With the show sold out in advance, we would have recouped our entire investment.

So what did James St Jean do?

He canceled the show.

The bottom line was James didn't want to spend the money it would take to pay the boys. In my opinion, if James promised something, regardless of what happened on his end, the boys deserved to

get paid. There was no excuse. They left their homes and their families. Some of them drove more than seven hours. He should have called every one of them a week ahead of time and saved them the trip.

The MTV production crew drove all the way from New York to film three segments for the documentary. The first segment featured wrestling schools, while the second highlighted wrestlers working for the big promotions. The final segment was supposed to be about the EWA promotion and the young guys working their way up the ladder. MTV filmed a small portion of one show, but got nothing else because the other two were canceled. Now they were stuck in Maine for two days. And with no wrestling show to film, what did the production crew do? They changed the focus of the final segment from the EWA to the story of Tony Atlas. I took them down to Knox Street where I had lived when I was homeless. I showed them the bench where I slept. The MTV documentary, released under the title True Life:

I'm a Pro Wrestler, was received with rave reviews.

The circumstances worked out horribly for the young EWA wrestlers. I felt bad for them because I had some good wrestlers and they would have benefited from the exposure. It didn't do James and the EWA any good, either. Josh took over control of the Eastern Wrestling Alliance and business made a complete nosedive. My long-range plan had been to take the belt off Master Sandy and put it on Dave Vicious, but after I left, Josh decided to put the belt on himself. The company never again did the business it did when I was booking. It got worse and worse because Josh tried to use "storylines" to compete with the WWF. By the time Josh did drop the title to Dave, the company was dead. EWA was the first and only independent promotion to be featured on MTV and Josh failed miserably.

I was the person who benefited the most from the documentary. After the program aired, I worked

almost every weekend for years. My phone rang constantly. I was traveling one day with George Graffam. While we were at a rest stop on the side of the highway, a young boy walked up to me and said, "You're Tony Atlas." When I asked him how he knew who I was, he said he saw me on MTV. He didn't say he remembered me from the WWF or WCW. He saw me on MTV. That documentary introduced me to a younger crowd and helped me keep a foot in the business. I hear all the horror stories about promoters stiffing the talent on their pay, but during the nine years I wrestled on the independents, only two promoters didn't pay me: a man named Bob Yourin, who promoted a European tour, and a guy in Vermont named Chad. I don't remember Chad's last name, but he worked for me when I promoted Atlas Championship Wrestling.

A few months after the MTV taping, I decided to run a fund-raising wrestling show for the veterans. They wanted to buy a van which would be used to transport wheelchair-bound veterans

back and forth to the hospital. Amanda Storm, who is a real sweetheart of a girl, helped me put a promotion together. We called it Atlas Championship Wrestling. It wasn't so much a promotion, however, as it was a fund-raising organization. Amanda was a smart girl. She handled all my paperwork, typed up flyers, created windows posters, uploaded information to the Internet, and sent out e-mails. All profits from our shows went directly to the charity we represented. I never took a payday. One of the things I did incorrectly was to allow people to write checks made out to Tony Atlas, rather than having them written directly to the charity. For instance, when I ran a show at the fair, the fair sent me a check which I would use to pay the talent, but the check was in my name. At the end of the year, I found a W2 in my mailbox and I was faced with a big tax bill.

I try to find the silver lining in things that happen to me. The years I spent as a homeless person were tragic, but if I hadn't moved to Maine, and if

I hadn't become homeless, I wouldn't be writing this book. And if I had remained in the business, I might have continued partying until I killed myself. The MTV special got me a lot of bookings, but life of the independent circuit was (and is) month-to-month living. If I didn't get a wrestling gig for two months, I was one month away from being homeless. Personal training pays well, but there's no guarantee there, either. I was paid by how many appointments I had, so I would make $900 one month and $200 the next. I was like a dog chasing his tail.

Chapter 23
New Life

In late 2005, I got a call from Howard Finkel, the ring announcer for WWE. He told me they wanted to induct me into the 2006 WWE Hall of Fame. My first question to Howard was, "How much am I gettin' paid?" I was at a point in my life

where I just couldn't afford to spend the money it would take to attend the Hall of Fame. Don't get me wrong. I felt honored to be considered, but the expenses were not in my budget. They had called me prior to that in 1994 when they wanted to induct me with Ernie Ladd, but there was no payday, so I turned them down. So when they called the second time, I wanted to be sure there was a payoff. Howard said, "There is, Tony. You get five thousand dollars and an action figure."

I said, "That's great. When do you want me there?"

After he gave me the necessary information, I said, "I'd like to bring somebody."

He said, "Sure. Who is it?"

I said, "My wife, Monika."

He then asked, "Who would you like to induct you into the Hall of Fame?"

I said, "If I have a choice to pick anyone, right off the top of my head, it would be either SD Jones or George Scott," because they were my two closest friends in the business.

Howard said, "I think SD is an excellent choice."

As the wrestlers were getting off the bus on the night of the rehearsal, Vince's limousine pulled up. The first words out of his mouth when he saw me were, "There he is. Look at those frickin' arms." Every time he saw me that night, he made a remark about my arms.

Every few months after the Hall of Fame ceremony, I would get a call from Johnny Ace [John Laurinaitis], who was the Vice President of Talent Relations at the time. Every so often, he would call and ask me to do different things for them. Johnny did the hiring and he did the firing. We used to joke that he called when we got hired and he called when we got fired, so if you got a call from Johnny when you weren't working

for the WWE, it was a good thing, but if you were working for them, you prayed every night that he wouldn't call.

I got another call from Johnny on April 18, 2007. He said they wanted to interview me about coming to work for the company as a "Goodwill Ambassador." On July 1, 2007, I signed a contract with WWE. One week later, I was back in the wrestling business on a full-time basis.

Three months into my new position, Robert Gibson and I went to the Ohio Valley Wrestling [OVW] training camp. He knew about my time working with teenagers in Maine and he wanted me to speak to the students about "respect." Vince said many of them didn't understand the meaning of the word. He wanted me to tell them about my career, and how a lack of respect and poor judgment would lead them down the road I traveled.

I went to the matches that night, gave them my

speech, and did what I was asked to do. Essentially, I told them, "Look, you guys have a great opportunity, so don't screw up your career and end up like me. In my day, if I messed up, I could go to Georgia, Texas, Florida, or Oklahoma. If you guys screw up now, you just go home. Right now, you're on the top of the heap. You're in the best place you can be, so don't throw it all away by doing something stupid." When the matches were over, Robert Gibson walked up and told me to go out and have another talk with the wrestlers. He added, "... especially the one with the tape on his forearm." The guy he was referring to was CM Punk [Phil Brooks]. . I don't know for sure, but I got the feeling that Robert didn't like Punk. I believe there was some kind of heat between them.

I have to admit that I didn't know who Punk was, and it shows how out of touch I really was with the wrestling business. I thought Punk was one of the OVW students, but in fact, he was the Extreme Championship Wrestling [ECW] champion. I

didn't watch ECW, so I didn't know.

It wasn't hard to figure out who Punk was because he was talking to people in the audience while I was talking to the boys. I raised my voice and said, "A lot of you have good attitudes, but some of you have attitudes that really suck." That got everybody's attention. Everybody, that is, except for Punk, who just kept talking. I said, "I said, some of ya'll have a sucky attitude," and I looked right at him when I said it. The guy he was talking to gave him the high sign, as if to say, "I think he's talking about you."

He looked around and said, "Are you talkin' to me?"

I said, "Yeah. They paid me to come down here to talk to you guys. I don't think they're payin' you to do the talkin'. You've been talkin' the whole time I've been talkin' and you should have been listening. You never sold out the Houston Coliseum, or sold out the Omni, or put any asses in

the seats. The least you could do is show some courtesy and listen."

Again, I thought he was one of the students.

He said, "Well, none of that stuff you're talkin' about now means anything today because this is a new time."

I said, "Well, it was what we did in the past that opened up the doors for you guys now. We laid the groundwork for you guys."

One thing led to another and he said, "Do you know who I am?"

Now I was hot. I said, "I really don't give a shit who you are. You're just a skinny, scrawny-necked kid who doesn't know how to keep his mouth shut." When he said something else, I said, "Look, you either shut your mouth or I'm gonna walk over there and shut it for you."

That was the end of it.

I have to give Punk a lot of credit. He wasn't paying attention that night, but he was 30 years old and he had a lot more sense than I did when I was his age. If someone had said something like that to me when I was a 30-year-old, I would have walked over and fought. Punk knew he had nothing to gain by fighting, so he took the high road, which was the correct path to follow. He had nothing to prove to me or anyone else.

The next day, I got a call from George Graffam. When he asked me for my account of what had taken place, I told him everything. George said someone from WWE was going to talk with Punk because he wasn't supposed to have anything to say. His only purpose for being at the training school was to be the main event on the show. That comment caught me off guard, prompting me to ask, "Does he work for WWE?"

George laughed and said, "Yeah. He's their champion, Tony."

My wife began laughing. She thought that was the funniest thing. She said, "Isn't that just like you, Tony. Of all people to pick a fight with, you had to pick their champion." I mean, I couldn't have picked a trainee or a jobber. I couldn't pick a guy who wasn't yet with the company. I had to pick the guy they were pushing on top. That would have been like me going to Atlanta or Charlotte and picking a fight with Ric Flair. It wouldn't have been Don Kernodle or Charlie Fulton. It would have been Ric Flair.

When I was first hired, it was to be a "goodwill ambassador" for the WWE. I would go wherever they sent me and I would actively promote the company. In July 2008, one year after I signed a contract with the company, I was asked to be at the July 8 TV tapings in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. When I arrived at the River Center arena, Johnny Ace and Mark Henry asked me to join them in a room for a meeting. John said they were converting my contract from that of Goodwill Ambassador to a regular talent contract. They

wanted me to travel with Mark Henry as his on-air manager, but my primary role would be to help him train and lose weight. John also asked me to participate in an angle on the July 8 episode of the ECW television show. I was to be the guest ring announcer for the main event which featured Tommy Dreamer against Mark Henry. During the match, I attacked Dreamer's second, Colin Delaney, and helped Mark get the victory. The match was officially ruled a "no contest," but I held up Mark's hand and declared him the winner. That was the first time I worked as a heel for the WWE.

Ten days later, I accompanied Mark to the ring for his rematch against Dreamer at the Great American Bash in Uniondale, New York. From that day forward, until June 29, 2009, when Mark was traded to the RAW brand, I managed Mark and appeared with him on television and at house shows.

Before joining the WWE, Mark had been a

weightlifter, placing tenth in the super heavyweight class at the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, Spain, when he was only 19 years old. In 1993 and 1994, he won the United States Olympic Festival championships, and in 1995, he won both the powerlifting and weightlifting National and Drug-Free championships. At the Pan American Games that same year, he won a silver medal in the super heavyweight division. In 1996, he went to Calgary to be trained as a professional wrestler by Stu Hart, Bret Hart, and Leo Burke. Since that time, he has been a valuable member of the WWE.

Since the age of 13, Mark had been programmed to train hard. When he first went to work for the WWE, he was in Olympic shape, but he soon forgot about his training. Life on the road began to take its toll and his focus shifted to partying after the matches. My job was to get him back in the shape he had once been, not only so he would have better matches, but so he would look more impressive. Mark was huge at the time I began working with him. He weighed 432 pounds. He

looked like a monster, but he looked better when he only weighed 320 pounds. At that weight, and even when he weighed 350, he looked like the Incredible Hulk.

Mark had a tough time getting back into the training routine. It was hard to get him motivated to train hard enough to get back into condition. Our relationship went smoothly for about two months. He was going to the gym with me. He worked out and did what I asked. When we met, Mark told me how he had looked up to me when he was a kid. He used to play with his friends and say, "You can't beat me! I'm Tony Atlas!" He also gave me credit for getting into weightlifting. He might have been blowing smoke up my butt, but he seemed to be sincere in his comments. Mark was sitting in the audience when I was inducted into the 2006 Hall of Fame. While I was speaking, the camera cut to Mark. He was smiling and wide-eyed, as if he was excited to see me in person.

In my opinion, the program would have worked if the company had just brought me in as his [on-camera] manager, rather than as his trainer. If they had brought me in as his manager first, we could have become friends and I could have built up his trust. Instead, when the company brought me in to work with Mark, they told him he had to listen to me and do what I told him to do. That didn't go over too well. Mark had been wrestling for the WWE for more than a decade and he was his own man. He had been doing what he wanted for 10 years. It almost was impossible for me to come in and begin telling him what to eat, how to train, and when to sleep. It automatically fostered resentment. When I began telling Mark what to do, all the respect and admiration he had for me was all but forgotten.

I'm happy to say that during the year we were together, we became good friends. It didn't happen overnight, but after a few months, he began to see the benefits of listening to me. One of the things Mark came to like about me was the fact that

I always stood up to him and tried to make him do what was right. He had been used to having his own way, but I gained his respect when I refused to back down during an argument. I used to joke and call him my son, until one day, he corrected me, saying, "I see you as my big brother."

In the final months we were together, Mark would walk up and say things like, "Hey, Tony! I'm doing more reps now," or, "I worked on cardio today." It was like he wanted to please me by doing what I had been pushing him to do. We both regret that he didn't get with the program sooner than he did, but that's water under the bridge.

One of the reasons I enjoyed traveling with Mark was the fact that I could trust him. The first day we traveled together, he said, "Listen, Tony. What is said in this car stays in this car."

I told him, "Mark, I don't have a problem with that. I don't want to be making 250-mile trips and worrying about every word I say."

I could trust Mark. The only thing I couldn't trust him with was his diet. In fact, one of the lessons I learned during my time with him was that it was dangerous to get between him and food. One time, we were staying at the Holiday Inn LaGuardia Airport Hotel. After the show that night, I told Mark I wanted to go to the hotel and catch up on my sleep. Mark said, "Let's get something to eat first."

"No, Mark. It's not good to eat just before you go to bed. Let's get some sleep. We'll get up in the morning and have a good breakfast before we go workout."

We had Chavo Guerrero with us and Mark was driving. When we got to the hotel, Mark drove right on by. As I watched the hotel go by, I asked, "Brother, what are you doing?" He didn't answer. He kept driving until he pulled into the parking lot of an all-night diner. "I've gotta get somethin' to eat," he said, as he opened his door and stepped out. Judging by the look on his face,

nothing I said was going to change his mind.

When we sat down, Mark began ordering things like chicken wings, pork chops, and carbohydrates. I told him, "I'm gonna take your food from you." I was trying to do my job. We had already received several warnings about Mark not losing weight. The company was constantly on my ass about his lack of weight loss and told me I had to put my foot down. I did that. I put my foot down … and I almost got it shoved down my throat. I told the waitress, "He just wants a salad."

Mark said, "I'm a grown man. You don't tell me what to eat."

I said, "Look, you may be big, but I learned a few things in the old days. The old-timers would stretch your ass."

"There's no son-of-a-bitch in this world that can beat me. I'm the world's strongest man!"

"The old-timers wouldn't waste time trying to

fight you, Mark. They'd stick a finger in your eye socket and pull your eye out."

When I said that, he jumped up from his seat and said, "I wish somebody would try it!" By that time, he wasn't just talking. He was shouting. Chavo, who hadn't said a word, was just sitting in his chair, unsure of what was going to happen. I finally gave in and let Mark order what he wanted. Once he finished his meal, Mark looked at me and calmly asked, "What time do you wanna meet at the gym in the morning?" It was as if nothing had happened.

The next day, we were supposed to meet and go to the gym. Mark showed up almost two hours late. When he walked in, he said, "When we finish working out, there's a new restaurant I want to take you to. It's called Sylvia's." Sylvia's is a popular soul-food restaurant in Harlem. On the day we went, there was a line of customers waiting to get into the building that stretched out onto the sidewalk. We had to wait an hour just to get a seat

and another hour to get served, so the entire process took almost three hours.

From there, we went back to his apartment because he wanted to watch a football game. I said, "We need to get to Madison Square Garden." We had a show there that night and I wanted to be there early. The show began at seven and we were expected to be there at least an hour early. That meant we had to be sitting in the dressing room at six o'clock, not walking in the door or pulling into the parking lot. Mark said, "We've got time." After we watched what was left of the game, we left … but Mark had to take his friend home.

Scott Epstein was waiting on me that night so I could get him in. We never had a problem getting complimentary tickets. If we needed tickets for someone, all we had to do was get there early and give the information to the agent in charge. He would say, "Okay, Tony," and write down the names in his book. The company gave us comps

because we had people who took care of us: hotel managers who gave us good rates, gym owners who let us work out for free, and other people who helped us when we were on the road. We had no problem getting tickets, but if we didn't see the agent before he sent the list to the box office, it was too late. On that particular night, I was too late to get Scott on the list. When we didn't show up by 6:15, he gave up and bought his own ticket.

Traffic was terrible. By the time we got to the Garden, we were late. We walked through the door at five minutes before seven. That was the first time in my life that I was late for a show at the Garden. Of all places to be late.

When Fit Finlay, the agent, asked me what happened, I explained and said, "Look, there's only one way to get Mark Henry to do what I want him to do. I have to hit him in the head with a baseball bat. Is that what you want me to do?" I didn't say it behind Mark's back. He was sitting right there when I said it. Mark was the only

person I could not train, and I have trained many athletes over the years. I just couldn't get him to do what he needed to do. For many years, the company allowed him to do whatever he wanted, and suddenly, they try to tell him he can't do those things any more? Mark has a heart as big as his body and he's the most gentle person you would ever want to meet, but when he's riled, he can be dangerous.

Believe it or not, people pick on him all the time. One time at the airport, Mark was bending over to pick up his baggage at the luggage carousel. A man who couldn't have weighed more than 180 pounds put out his hands and began pushing Mark. It looked like a mouse trying to push an elephant in a cartoon. Mark slowly straightened up, twisted around, and looked down at him. The guy kept pushing. Mark said, "What are you doing?"

The guy said, "I need to get my bags and you're in the way."

Mark said, "Can you just wait until I get mine?"

By that time, everybody was listening and watching. Meanwhile, both of their bags had passed by and were going back through the conveyor system. Mark said, "Listen, let me get my bag and I'll be out of your way."

"Just because you're big doesn't mean you can ..." The guy went on and on. "I'm not afraid of you." I didn't hear the rest of it. Whenever Mark fell into a situation in which he might lose his temper, my practice was to step between him and the other person. Mark and I argued a lot, but I knew he had enough respect for me that he wouldn't hit me.

We went to the gym one time and I stopped at the counter to check in. It was my job to check us in because Mark was always in a surly mood due to me not letting him eat before our workout. As the lady behind the counter told me how happy they were to have us there, I heard a female voice say,

"You're not so big." I turned to see a lady punching Mark in the arm. She was dancing around like a boxer and hitting him like he was a punching bag. When Mark had enough, he said, "Lady, why are you hittin' on me?"

"Aw, that don't hurt you."

I walked over and said, "M'am, will you leave the poor man alone. We've been travelin' all night long." I never knew why she did that. Fortunately, Mark didn't hit her. Mark once told me that he had been sued for pushing someone, so the experience must have taught him a lesson. Mark and I made many, many trips together, and I could never understand why people would pick on him. If you've ever seen him in person, and you had good sense, Mark would be the last person you would want to aggravate. When we were in Europe, I saw Big Show, who stands seven feet tall and weighs more than 400 pounds, run down the street to get away from Mark.

On that particular occasion, Big Show did something that really bothered Mark. People don't realize that when a big man like Andre the Giant or Big Show farts, it hangs around for a long time. In fact, when Andre farted on the bus, we could smell it for hours. It was as if the odor saturated our clothes and the seat cushions. Mark thought it was disrespectful for someone to fart when women were on the bus and he had warned Big Show about it several times. The last time he caught Big Show farting, he said, "Do it one more time and I'm gonna get you." On that night, Big Show was standing at the back of the bus. Looking around, he didn't see Mark, so he cut loose with a thunderous, resounding fart. No sooner had the sound died away then Mark stepped up onto the top step of the bus. You could hear people go, "Uh, oh. Here comes Mark." Big Show, of course, acted innocent. When Mark stormed down the aisle towards him, Big Show jumped out the side door of the bus. He didn't touch one step on the way out. Unfortunately for him, neither did Mark Henry. Mark caught him a few yards away from

the bus and began shaking him. We could see that Big Show was really scared, so several of us went out and talked Mark into letting him go.

People just don't realize just how strong Mark Henry really is. When we were in Germany, the guys neglected to turn out the overhead lights in the bus and the battery died during the time we were wrestling. We didn't have jumper cables, so our solution was to push the bus fast enough that the driver could kick start it in first gear. We had at least 10 wrestlers pushing that bus, but we couldn't get up enough speed to do the job. Mark, who had been watching us from the sidelines, told us to get out of the way. He pushed the bus by himself until he was literally trotting down the road. Mark is an incredible human being. He used to play jokes on people by moving their cars onto the sidewalk. He would pick up the back end of the car and swivel it over, and then he would do the same with the front.

One of the things I really came to realize about the wrestling business during my time with the

WWE was just how much the business has changed. The most striking difference was that the business actually has very little (if anything) to do with "wrestling." That's not a criticism, but the idea of "wrestling" being the primary draw is totally gone. Everything from what we say to what we do in the ring is prepared for us in advance. We are told what method of transportation we will use, where we will stay, and at what time we report to the arena.

When I was managing Mark, I went to every house show on which he was booked. When my role was changed to that of Abraham Washington's sidekick, I only went to the TV tapings. The good thing about being on the road was, we got a great push and we had a great life. The one thing we didn't get was sleep. Our travel schedules depended on which show we appeared. RAW is always the end of the tour, so the guys booked on RAW leave on Friday and come home on Tuesday. The house show begins the tour and TV ends it. But for Smackdown and ECW, the guys

leave on Saturday and come home on Wednesday because they tape TV on Tuesday. When I was with Mark, I would leave on Saturday and do the house shows. After we split, I would leave on Monday and come back on Wednesday.

On a typical Saturday, I would go to the airport in the afternoon and fly to the town where the house show was being held. We always leave the night before. We never wait to leave the day of TV. The TV tapings would often be held the next day in another city, so after the show, even if it was ten o'clock at night, Mark Henry and I would sometimes drive up to 300 miles. We would check into our hotel at three o'clock in the morning, get up at seven o'clock, eat breakfast, and be at the gym at nine o'clock. At noon, we would be back at the hotel and leave an hour later for TV. After the taping, we would get back to the hotel around eleven o'clock. The next morning, we had to be up by three o'clock to catch a six o'clock flight home.

The fans would be surprised to know how much

driving we really do. There were times when Mark was on all three programs. We had to leave right after the house show, do RAW, and then drive more than 300 miles for the other two TVs. Many nights, by the time we would get to the hotel, we only had enough time for two hours of sleep. There were also times when I would pay $100 a night for a hotel room and be in the room for less than an hour. When the schedule is that tight, a lot of the guys just stay up or nap in their cars.

One of the most important things the company expects from their talent is that we arrive at the buildings on time. When we're booked on TV, depending on the venue, we have to be at the building anywhere from noon to two o'clock. When we walk into the building, someone stationed at the door writes down the time we got there. It was important to be there well before our scheduled start time, so I always tried to arrive at least a half hour early. To accomplish that, I always gave myself an hour to

get to the arena, even if the building was only 10 minutes away. If I had to be there at two o'clock, I was on the road by one. Teddy Long used to make me nervous because he only gave himself 30 minutes. "The building's only ten minutes away," he'd say. "Yeah, but anything could happen." There could be a car accident and we would have to sit in traffic for a half hour. One hour was my plan. Once again, that goes back to George Scott, who drummed it into my head: "Leave an hour early."

The agents and writers arrived at the buildings around nine or 10 in the mornings for meetings and would have everything planned out in advance. At least, that was the way it was supposed to work. When we walked in the door, they were usually bailing out of the production office with notes in their hands. If we were scheduled to do a pre-tape, we would get that information as soon as we walked into the building. However, I soon learned that no matter what I was told, nothing was set in stone until I was actually walking down the

aisle. The writers might have the entire program written down the night before, and on the following day, they could change some or all of it. There were times when they would give me a script at two o'clock for a show that begins at seven. By five o'clock, they had rewritten the script … so I had to forget what I had memorized and relearn the new script. A few minutes before I went to the ring, it could change again. Many times, I would be handed a new script while I was standing at the Gorilla, which is the on-deck position behind the entrance curtain. The agent would say, "Forget the other script, Tony. This is what we're doing now." Most of the time, Mark and I were on the first match, so I would stand there studying it, trying to learn as much as possible in the few seconds I had before I went to the ring. When Mark's music began playing, I would walk down the aisle and try to remember what I had to say. Even then, plans were subject to change. The production engineers would sit in the control room and talk to the referee, who had a mike in his ear, telling him to "do this, don't do that." The referee

would relay the instructions to the talent and we would have to adjust the match to suit what we were told.

I hear a lot of the old-timers (including myself) talk about how "everything is scripted in wrestling today." I've learned that in many ways, working from a script is much tougher. In the old days, George Scott would have a meeting at the beginning of the week and he'd tell us what we were going to do on television. We might have some input here and there, but for the most part, what George laid out is what we did. It wasn't that complicated, either. All he would say at TV was, "Tony, you're going to wrestle Ric Flair in the Greensboro Coliseum. Go out and do an interview." I went out and made it up as I went along. I couldn't really make a mistake because it was all impromptu.

However, I'm intimidated when somebody hands me a piece of paper and tells me to repeat what it says, especially if I have to do it five minutes after

I get it. I'm amazed at how quickly some of the guys can memorize a script. Teddy Long is the master. Five minutes before Teddy's match or vignette, Vince would hand him a script and Teddy would go out and not miss a single line. That was incredible.

I'm also at a disadvantage due to the fact that I don't read well. One of the tricks I learned, though, was to pull aside one of the young wrestlers and say, "Dagummit, kid. I don't have my glasses. Can you read that to me?" As long as somebody was in the dressing room, I could find someone to help me. I had a similar issue with my shirt collar. My biceps are so big that I can't reach my neck to fasten the collar of my shirt. I would say, "Can you fasten this for me, kid?" For the entire time I was with the company, I never fastened my shirt collar. I could tie my tie, but I couldn't push the knot up all the way. When one of the guys would see me fumbling with it, they would come over to help, especially R-Truth [Ron Killings]. He'd walk over and say, "Come here,

Pops. I'll help ya." At other times, Mark Henry would see me struggling with my tie while he was talking to his wife on the phone. He'd say, "Hold on, honey. I gotta fix Tony's tie." He'd fix my tie and then return to his conversation with his wife.

I kept my nose clean and stayed out of trouble for most of the time I was with the company. I only remember three incidents for which I got called onto the carpet.

First of all, stooging has always been a problem in the wrestling business, but in the old days, there were normally only one or two stooges in a territory. Tommy Young was one of the most honest referees I have ever met. He would tell you, "I'm a stooge for the office. If there's something you don't want the office to know, don't tell me about it or do it around me because I will tell them." There's something refreshing about somebody who will rat on you, but warns you ahead of time that they'll do it if given the opportunity. For the most part, however, we could

trust each other. In today's world, the walls have ears. The stooges are whoever is in the dressing room. Everyone! In the old days, one of main things drummed into the heads of rookies was to "keep your mouth shut and do exactly as you're told." That message has more relevance today than ever before.

As a prime example, R-Truth [Ron Killings] had heard about my foot fetish. While we were on a flight to Europe, he came over to my seat and said, "I wanna see your tape." At the time, I carried a DVD of me getting walked on. Matt Hardy took the DVD from me and put it in his laptop. Of course, once word spread throughout the plane that "Tony's going to play his foot-fetish tape," every wrestler left their seat and came over to where we were sitting. Kane, Undertaker, Natalie Neidhart, Maria Kanellis, Zach Ryder … everybody on Smackdown at that time had shifted over to our side of the plane to watch the video of a girl kicking me in the face with her boots. Less than a minute later, the flight attendant came back and

said, "You're going to have to take turns looking at that because the pilot if having trouble keeping the plane level."

The only person who didn't come over to watch was Mark Henry. He said, "Tony, I want to picture you as Mister U.S.A., not as some foot slave." He didn't want to see it. He said, "I have a certain picture of you in my head and I don't want anything else in there." He didn't want anything to interfere with what he remembered about me when he was a kid.

When we landed at Cardiff, Wales, we went to the building. As soon as I walked through the entrance, Fit Finlay, one of the road agents, pulled me to the side and said, "Tony. I heard about the tape. Get rid of it."

Take a second to think about that. We got off the plane, we were driven directly to the arena, and the company knew about the incident before I walked through the door. Once again, there is no

media outlet greater than the Internet.

My foot-fetish video was nothing compared to the things we did 30 years ago. In those days, we entertained each other by doing things like banging broads in a room … with the boys all watching. An incident like that would get us fired today. My video, on the other hand, was nothing more than mild entertainment for the boys. It wasn't raunchy, it didn't denigrate women, and we didn't share it with the fans, but our society had changed so much that management at WWE thought a video like that, if allowed to circulate, would reflect badly on the company. That was a wake-up call for me. The things we used to do to entertain each other were now against company policy.

One of the reasons why we have to be a whole lot more careful of what we do and say is because we're representatives of the WWE and Vince McMahon. Everything we do reflects directly on the company. People don't look at the wrestler. They look at the WWE, and Vince

McMahon, in particular. If they think they have grounds for a lawsuit, they don't look at the wrestler. They look at Vince, the person with the deep pockets. If they have a complaint, they immediately contact the WWE and ask why they have so-and-so working for them.

That leads directly to another thing I learned about the "new" wrestling business. There is no longer any such thing as secrets. The "right to privacy" is gone due to technology. In the old days, things that happened in the dressing room stayed within the parameters of the business. If Jim Crockett fired Ric Flair in 1980, the only people who would know the reasons behind his firing were the wrestlers, and many times, only the promoters knew the story. Even the wrestlers were kept in the dark. Today, everybody in the world would know exactly why Ric Flair had been fired. When I was told I was being released at the end on April 20, 2010, the whole world knew about it within hours. For all I know, they knew about it before I did. An hour or two after I talked

to Johnny Ace, promoters were calling me, wanting to know if I'd like to appear at their show. I have had fans call to tell me things about the company that even I didn't know. How could that happen? It's simple. Somebody in the dressing room sends a text to a friend, they text someone else, and that person puts it on the Internet.

With today's technology, the wrestlers aren't even safe when they're having dinner. One time, Mark Henry and I were sitting at a table in a restaurant and talking about business. Mark suddenly said, "Cut that out." I looked up to see him tilt his head towards a nearby table. A guy was filming everything we did and said with his cell phone.

When the company holds private meetings, the topic of discussion is on the Internet before the meeting is adjourned. The guys in the dressing room, mostly the younger guys, sit around with their cell phones in their hands and send text

messages. They text and post everything they hear. Within minutes of something happening in New York, people know about it in Japan. In the old days, we had both old timers and young guys. Today, most of the guys in the business are kids. When I first saw the guys sitting around with their laptops, I thought they were doing their taxes, conducting business, or making hotel and plane reservations. But, no! They were posting things on Facebook. It's like an addiction.

As an example, in 2007, I had to be at the Florida Championship Wrestling training facility the day after I had the argument with CM Punk. One of the guys who ran the school came up and said, "I'm sorry to hear about what happened."

I said, "What are you talking about?"

"The incident with CM Punk. We heard the two of you got into a fight"

The rest of that day, that was all I heard from the

FCW students. When I arrived back home in Maine the next day, my buddy George Graffam stopped by the house and said, "It's all over the Internet."

"Let me guess … my fight with CM Punk."

The second time I was chastised by the office, we were in Pittsburgh. When we checked into the hotel, I asked the lady at the front desk to make a reservation for an early shuttle to the airport. The next morning, when I began to board the shuttle, the driver said he couldn't take me because he had to take airline personnel. I said, "I made reservations, too. I have a flight to catch." One of the pilots who was getting onto the shuttle said, "Let him go with us. We have room."

When I arrived at the arena that night, Jay Strongbow pulled me to the side and said, "Tony, you have to call the hotel and apologize to the shuttle driver."

"For what?"

"We heard you got upset when he said he couldn't take you to the airport."

"What?" I had no idea what he was talking about, but I called the hotel and they put me in touch with the driver. Apparently, the driver had been talking with another wrestler that morning and jokingly said something like, "I thought Tony Atlas was gonna beat me up over his reservation." Later that day, when I asked him about it, he said, "I was just laughing about it. I was joking with people, telling them I was glad I didn't have to fight you because I'd have to take you down."

That was what the company heard. The wrestler who had talked to the driver went into "stooge mode" and called the office to tell them what he had heard. Years ago, even getting into an argument with someone wouldn't have been a big deal, but today is a whole new ball of wax. You don't have to do anything to get into trouble.

The last time I was reprimanded was for not following the dress code. The WWE dress code states we have to wear dress slacks, our shirts must have a collar, and we can't wear tennis shoes, t-shirts, bandanas, or skull caps. In other words, we could dress casual, but not too casual. That's pretty lenient considering the fact that before I went back to work for the company, talent was required to wear suits and ties. They lowered the standards to make the boys feel more comfortable during the hectic travel schedule. Undertaker was instrumental in bringing that change about. Back when I broke into the business, we were required to wear suits and ties only to big venues like the Charlotte Coliseum, Madison Square Garden, and the Boston Gardens. What has changed a little is that we don't have to wear a suit to every event. There are guys who don't even wear a suit to Wrestlemania. That's not allowed across the board, though. Like everything else, the rules fit some people, but not others.

On the night I was chastised, I was boarding a plane for a show in Wisconsin. We had to catch a redeye flight at midnight because we had TV the next day. They were afraid we wouldn't get there in time if we waited to fly out the following morning. I was wearing a nice sweatsuit that my wife had bought for me. Ricky Steamboat, the agent for that show, approached me and said, "That's a violation, Tony. You can't wear a sweat suit and tennis shoes. This is a warning. The next time you do, you'll be fined. The time after that, you'll be terminated." We landed at two o'clock and arrived at the hotel around three. As usual, I woke up at seven o'clock for breakfast and had Mark at the gym by nine.

Considering my record during past runs with the company, three infractions for minor offenses was pretty good. I can only hope people will remember how I turned out, rather than how I once was.

The kids wrestling today are more educated about

business than we were in the old days. It's no longer "wrestling." The name of the game is sports entertainment and Vince runs the business like a corporation. It doesn't matter which TV show you're on: Monday Night RAW, Friday Night Smackdown, or WWE Superstars. If you're an employee of the WWE, you're considered a valuable member of the team, no matter if you're on the bottom of the list or on the top of the list. You might be on RAW this year, but when they have the draft, you might be moved to Smackdown. Sure, some people are pushed more than others, but for the most part, everyone is treated as a component of one, individual company. That goes for the referees, the cameramen, the seamstresses, the doctor, and the ring crew. Nobody has more respect than anybody else and everybody knows they can be replaced at the drop of a hat.

One of the things most people don't realize about the WWE is that there are no prima donnas. The only wrestler I know who is truly respected on all

levels is the Undertaker. Shawn Michaels and Triple H are highly respected, as well, but Undertaker is the heart and soul of the WWE. Nobody comes close to Undertaker in regards to respect and status. In fact, I would say the boys have as much respect for Undertaker as they do for Vince.

The dressing room has changed a great deal from the old days, as well. In the territory days, everybody walked around the dressing room buck naked. The boys don't do that now. They wrap a towel around them and reach under the towel to take off their underwear. During the two years I was with the company, I never saw one naked wrestler. On the night of my first match in 1975, when I walked into the dressing room in Anderson, South Carolina, I knew what size Johnson every wrestler on the card had, and that includes the referees. After my match that night, George Scott was standing in the shower. While he talked to me, I was looking at his naked, hairy back. The guys wouldn't do that now. If someone is in the

shower room when I walk by, they'll pull the shower curtain shut. I'll occasionally mess with the guys and pull some old-school stuff, and say things like, "That's a nice butt you have." The young kids just don't know how to handle that. In fact, there are a few of them who won't take a shower while I'm in the shower room.

Two months after Mark moved to RAW, I appeared on ECW as the announcer for a segment of the program called The Abraham Washington Show, a recurring segment in which Abe [Brian Jossie] would interview wrestlers. I was Abe's "Ed McMahon." While I was with Abraham, one of the agents told me they had eliminated the Goodwill Ambassador program, which resulted in Hacksaw Duggan, Afa Anoai, and Superstar Graham being let go. Thank goodness my contract had been converted from goodwill ambassador to talent.

In December, Abraham had a hip operation. The last time we talked, Abraham said it could be six

months to a year before the doctors would give him clearance to wrestle again. In February, I was told Abraham would be hosting The Abraham Washington Show at the Florida Championship Wrestling developmental school with Aksana [Zivile Raudoniene] filling my role. That left me with nothing to do.

On February 2, 2010, Vince, Jr. announced he had decided to eliminate the ECW television show. The last episode aired on February 16, 2010.

During the third week of April, several wrestlers were laid off, including Mickie James, Shelton Benjamin, and Mike Knox. Teddy Long called to assure me that my name wasn't on the list. However, on Friday, April 30, Teddy called again and said I was being released. He explained the reason, which I fully understood and halfway expected. "Tony, we just don't have a spot for you right now." Fortunately, when someone gets their release, the company gives them a 90-day notice,

so I remain on the payroll until August 1. Teddy told me he was pushing hard to rekindle the Goodwill Ambassador program, so it's possible it might come up again.

Monika and I came to the conclusion that I lost my job because Mark Henry refused to do the necessary training to lose weight. When we were first put together, Johnny Ace told us, "Both of your careers depend on Mark getting into the shape he was when he first began working for the company." If he had lost the weight, I might still be managing him. When they put the WWF title on Mark, they told him he could keep it as long as "he" wants it. In other words, everything—his future and my future—was in his hands. When he refused to get into shape, they took the belt away. He called the other day to tell me he had lost 12 pounds. Monika laughed and said, "Why couldn't he have done that when you were there?" I understood it, though. Wrestlers are very independent. They have their own way of doing things and they follow their own schedule. If

someone comes in and interrupts that, as I did with Mark, it throws their lives off kilter. In 1976, when I first began riding with Johnny Weaver, he put in his country music, he chewed his tobacco, and stopped to eat wherever he wanted to stop. I was riding in his car. I went along with whatever decisions Johnny made. However, in Mark's case, I couldn't go along with all his decisions because the things Mark did were jeopardizing my job. I don't blame him, though, because Mark's wasn't to blame for the way the company did things. I became his boss on the first day we were together and he didn't like it.

Teddy Long and I became pretty good friends. While I was on the Abraham Wash show, I traveled with Teddy. The first time I made a trip with him, we were with the Boogeyman [Marty Wright]. A few minutes before we left Scranton, Pennsylvania for Boston, it began to snow. Before getting onto the interstate, I stopped at a convenience store to get something to eat.

I said, "Teddy, do you want something to eat?"

"No, no. I'm not hungry."

We got back in the car and drove some more. I stopped again about a hundred miles down the road. Again, I asked, "Teddy, do you want something to eat?"

"No, no. It's too late. I can't eat that stuff late at night."

As soon as we left, it began snowing again. I could barely see the road because they hadn't plowed the roads yet, so I was following the tracks of the tractor-trailer rigs. Eighty miles down the road, Teddy asked me to get off the exit so he could go to the bathroom and get a sandwich. I looked at the GPS and saw we were about 10 miles from the building. I said, "Teddy, we're only ten miles away. We'll be at the hotel in fifteen minutes." I wasn't about to get off the interstate unless I absolutely had to because the

exits ramps were a solid sheet of ice and snow. When we did get off the interstate, we were four blocks from the hotel. I could see it. I had been driving in the snow for three hours and my nerves were stretched tight. All I wanted to do was park the car at the hotel and go up to my room. Teddy said, "Tony, you gotta stop. I've gotta pee. I can't hold it no longer. Let me out at this restaurant."

I said, "Okay." When he stepped out of the car, he said, "While I'm in there, I'm gonna get a sandwich."

I said, "Teddy, you can go pee, but if you get a sandwich, we're gonna leave you here and you can catch a cab to the hotel. I'm goin' to the hotel. I'm not gonna sit here and wait for you. You had all day to get a sandwich." Teddy went to the bathroom, but he didn't order any food. He was so mad he couldn't eat. He wouldn't talk to me for about a week.

Catering always puts out cold cuts so the boys can make sandwiches after a show, so later that night, I was making one. One of the referees, Mike Chioda, came up to me and said, "Tony, you had all day to get a sandwich." He used the exact words I had used with Teddy. I knew right away why he said that. I dropped my sandwich and I laughed for a long time. Teddy was so mad that he told all the wrestlers what I had said. For the rest of that month, every time I made a sandwich, somebody would walk up and say, "Tony, you had all day to get a sandwich."

The next day, Teddy was supposed to ride with me. Instead, he took a cab to the airport, rented a car, and drove by himself. I finally apologized, and within a few days, Teddy and I began talking. Now he looks back and laughs about it. We became good friends and we talk to each other every week.

On my last night with the company in a talent capacity, Mickey James, Slam Master J [Terry

Gordy's son, Ray Gordy], and I appeared in a promo with Jack Swagger. After that, the company sent me to make appearances at events like poker tournaments, ice-cream-eating contests, and golf tournaments. I did autograph signings and appeared for the Make-A-Wish Foundation, the Taser Foundation [police officers killed in the line of duty], and the Jimmy Fund.

Other than being given the opportunity to once again work in the wrestling industry, one of the greatest things that happened to me during the past 10 years was being reunited with my daughter.

I was married to my first wife, Joyce, for eight months. We were together for three years, but we were only married for eight months. Joyce and I have one daughter, Nikki. I also have a stepdaughter, who is Monika's daughter. I helped raise her from age 14, so I think of her as my daughter.

Joyce and I divorced when Nikki was just four

years old. They moved and I didn't know where they were for a long time. One day, when I was working in the Bahamas, an American tourist walked up and asked if I was Tony Atlas. When I said yes, he said they lived across the street from Joyce and my daughter. I hadn't seen her for 10 years, but he said she talked about me all the time. I gave him my business card and asked him to have her call me.

One week later, my telephone rang. It was my ex-wife, Joyce. The first words out of her mouth were, "Where have you been? We thought you had died."

She then put Nikki on the telephone. She was 14 years old at the time. She's 31 years old now. Until two years ago, all she would say to me when I called was, "Yeah … okay … uh-huh." It's a shame, but we really were strangers. When I would tell her I loved her, she would say, "Okay." She never said it back. It really surprised me a couple of years ago when she finally told me

she loved me. She has three beautiful children: two girls and a boy. I saw my grandchildren for the first time when I went to visit Pez Whatley. He brought me down to Opa-locka, Alabama for a show he was promoting.

Since then, I've been in regular touch with Nikki. This is where, once again, I have to give Vince, Jr. credit. For many years, Nikki didn't have a father, and her and her mother went through some rough times. Thanks to Vince for giving me a job with the WWF, I just recently had an opportunity to help her financially. When we had a show in Alabama, he allowed me to bring her and her family to the matches. The wrestlers all treated them like visiting dignitaries and lavished them with gifts. Triple H and Mark Henry were extremely gracious to my daughter and grandchildren that night. To top off the evening, they were able to see their grandfather perform in person for the first time.

Chapter 24
Credit Where Credit is Due

A lot of people knock Vince and the WWE, but in the territory days of wrestling, if we had a lot of the things the WWE offers today, our lives would have been much better. In the old days, we were given a two-week notice, and many times, we didn't even get that much of a notice. The WWE also has a wellness program which, in spite of those who don't believe it does any good, helps a lot of the guys get their acts together. They do random drug testing at TV tapings. We might go a month without being tested, but the following month, we might be tested every week. When we had extended time off, it wasn't unusual for someone to knock on our doors and request a urine sample. That happened to me once. I was sitting at home watching TV when somebody knocked on my door. I opened the door to see a man standing there with a briefcase in one hand. He said, "I'm here with the Wellness Program for the WWE. We

have to get a urine sample from you." I said, "Come on in." I peed in a cup, signed the paper, and he went on his way. The tests are random, too. Everybody has to do them. The first two times we fail, we get fined. The third time, in addition to being suspended, we get fined the amount of money we would have made if we hadn't been suspended. If we fail again, we get terminated. That's what happened with Rob Van Dam.

The company holds seminars to teach the guys how to stay in shape during their time on the road. Once or twice a month, Vince has someone come in to talk about financial planning. The meetings aren't mandatory, but they teach us how to invest money and give us information on how to find an investment counselor. They help us set up retirement programs and teach us about health insurance. They don't force us to participate in a retirement or insurance program, but they keep our names on a list until we do.

Vince also funds a program for former wrestlers who have a drug program. All former WWE wrestlers are eligible. If they want to go to rehab, the WWE will pay for it. Even though I'm no longer with them, they gave me a number to call if I have a problem with drugs in the future. They would verify my former employment with the WWE and the company would pick up the tab for my rehab.

I've heard so many people blame Vince for taking over the territories and making it tough for the boys to find work. Let me tell you something. Just like me, the boys brought their problems on themselves. When Junkyard Dog was working in Louisiana, Bill Watts paid him $150,000 a year and bought him a brand-new, four-door, Mercedes Benz 450. Watts also bought the Dog's wife a beauty salon. And yet, when Vince called Dog, he left Watts immediately. So who screwed whom? Vince knew about the business that Dog was doing in Louisiana. He also knew about the disloyalty of the wrestlers. If you want to write a

book about the loyalty of wrestlers, you should title it The Ship of Pirates. We were like a bunch of cutthroats. There was no unity among the boys. There was no loyalty to anyone. Vince knew that, so what he did was use that to his own advantage ... and everybody got mad at him for doing it. How can you get mad at someone who used their disloyalty? How loyal was Hulk Hogan to Vince? He jumped ship and went to work for WCW. As time passed, the wrestlers became more and more demanding.

In my opinion, Bret Hart was as wrong as he could be when he made a big deal over being asked to "lose a match." Bret Hart owes everything he has to Vince McMahon. Without Vince, Bret would have been a relative unknown. He was a star in Calgary, but his daddy was the promoter, so what does that really mean? Then, when Vince put him over and made him a superstar, Bret refused to drop the WWF title in Canada. When Vince took the title from him during what is now known as the "Montreal

Screwjob," Bret had the audacity to spit in Vince's face and hit him. Come on, Bret. "It's a work!" What Bret should have done was say, "Yes, Mister McMahon. I'll do whatever you ask." For 13 years, Vince did almost everything Bret asked of him. For 13 years! Then Vince asked Bret to do one thing, and Bret said, "No." That shows you the character of Bret Hart. He's still crying about it.

The difference between WCW and WWE was that Vince McMahon knew how to promote talent. Most of the biggest names in the wrestling business—Hulk Hogan, Steve Austin, Mick Foley, Mark Calaway [Undertaker], Dwayne Johnson—all wrestled for WCW, but WCW didn't know how to promote them properly. None of them became superstars until they went to the WWF. People can knock Vince all they want, but he made stars out of the people WCW threw away.

WCW wanted to keep Ron Simmons and Sting on top. If someone new came into the territory, they

would have Sting beat him. In the following weeks, six other wrestlers would beat the guy. After everybody in the whole territory took turns beating him, they put the guy in the ring against Ron Simmons for the world title. And they wonder why they went out of business. There was no thought, no planning, and no purpose behind the things they did. They just threw ideas onto the table in the hopes that something would work. WCW also hired people who wanted to promote themselves, not wrestling. When Dusty Rhodes was the booker, Dusty was pushing Dusty Rhodes. When Bill Watts was the booker, Bill was pushing his kid [Erik Watts]. Did the kid have any talent? Well, do you remember anything the kid did after his dad lost his job? Not really. He worked for the WWF, ECW, and TNA, but he hasn't done anything memorable.

The southern promoters did everything they could to keep the old, southern traditions alive. That was great for the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida, but it didn't click in other parts of the country. The

promoters didn't realize the world was no longer into characters like John Wayne and Roy Rogers. Vince McMahon took a broader view of the country and began to promote cowboys, Indians, doctors, lawyers, clowns, and barbarians. He saw the kids going to see Arnold Schwarzenegger, not the guys in the white hats. The wrestling fans had evolved, too. They wanted to see Arnold, but WCW wanted to force feed "their" idea of heroes down the throats of the fans. They never caught onto the concept and continued to do everything the way they did it in the '70s.

Unlike every other time I worked for the WWE, I left on good terms. I wasn't released because of something I did. I have been told many times that Vince liked me, but business is business. They just didn't have anything for me.

There is one thing I always understood about my last run with the WWF: the only reason Vince brought me back was to help me out. He didn't

have to do that. There are many other people he could have hired who could have done what I did.

If I could live my life all over again, I would only change two things: I wouldn't do drugs and I would have been more dependable when I was working for the WWF. Even with all the problems and challenges I faced (most of which were of my own making), being introduced to professional wrestling was the greatest thing that ever happened to me.

Now that I'm older and wiser, I have a better understanding of why certain things happened in my life. I don't blame anyone for my failures other than myself. Klondike Bill once told me, "You are the captain of your own ship." That turned out to be true. I had one opportunity after another placed at my feet, and I often detoured around those opportunities and derailed my life.

On the other hand, wrestling provided me with a paid trip around the world. I've been to every

state in America. I've been to Europe, Japan, and the Philippines. I was the first black wrestler to tour South Africa. Every promoter I worked for wanted to push me to the top. Every promoter. When I first got into the business, I worked on the bottom for six months, but after that, I was a main eventer for most of my career. Tito Santana once told me, "Tony, you did much more in the business than I ever did. I never was a main event. I was a top wrestler, but I was never main event." I never thought about it until he said that. Tony Atlas was always a main eventer.

Dusty Rhodes once summed up the reason why professional wrestling was the greatest business in the world: You can live like a king and you are individually employed. I never worked for the WWF or NWA. I worked for me. I had my own private company, and how well that company did was entirely up to me. There were several ways a wrestler could get to the top. One was through their own merits, talent, and ability, while another was through politics (i.e., cutthroat) and who you

knew. Everyone had their own way of doing it, and you never knew who was doing what. It wasn't until I got out of wrestling that I realized it was like any other business. You never hear a wrestler call it "wrestling." They call it "the business." But I had to get out of it before I realized I was in it. I was a jock and I went into it with the mentality of a jock. I never backstabbed anyone and nobody can ever say I did anything to further my career by hurting someone else. The only damage I did was to myself.

Today, wrestling schools are a dime a dozen. They've structured independent cards so anyone can get in and anyone with cash in their hand can "be a wrestler." When I broke into the business, you had to have something special to become a wrestler. When a wrestler walked down the street, people knew they were somebody. In my day, if a guy weighed a buck-ten, promoters would tell him, "I think you should find another profession. You're not cut out to be a wrestler." Only a very, very few were honored

with the opportunity to become a wrestler.

When Monika was 57 years old, I took her to her first live wrestling show. It was a small promotion using wanna-be wrestlers from a local wrestling school. When the show was over, I asked Monika what she thought about it. She said, "Hell, I can whip half those guys." Now, when a 57-year-old woman thinks she can whip half the guys in the ring, something is wrong. Many of the independent promotions are screwing the people. The people pay to see professional wrestling ... and they're being fed everything but wrestling. Most of the guys only wrestle on the weekend ... one day a week. If someone wrestles every Saturday night for a year, he's only been in wrestling for 52 days. And yet, if you ask them, they'll tell you they've been wrestling for a year. How can you wrestle 52 times, be something else for the other 300-plus days, and call yourself a wrestler? In my day, a "wrestler" wrestled 300 days or more, and at times, we would wrestle two or three times on Saturday.

The guys who do make it to the big time are job scared. They only have one place to go. If they screw up there, they're done. We felt fairly secure about our jobs in the old days. If a promoter got mad at us, we could just go to another territory.

The saddest thing about the wrestling business is, when you're no longer in the business, it's as if you were never in the business. It's like you aren't even alive. The guys are so self-consumed that they don't take time to stay in touch, or to see what problems we might have. When I told people I had been homeless, they all said, "Oh, you should have called me!" Truth be told, I did call a few of the guys, but they wouldn't return my calls.

The other bad thing about leaving wrestling is not having anyone with whom to communicate. Wrestlers have a language all their own and I don't have anybody in my circle of acquaintances who speaks my language. We say things only other wrestlers can understand. When I talk to SD Jones or George Steele, they understand

me, but when I talk to TC at the gym, he doesn't know what the hell I'm talking about.

I've experienced many injuries during my career. I suffered a serious neck injury, dislocated my hip, back, and shoulder blade, broke my nose four times, and fractured my ribs. My shoulder blade would pop out when I did dropkicks. I never fixed it because there was no time for doctors. We always had another show the next day, so the boys would doctor each other in the dressing room. We would give each other massages and pop each others' necks. I still experience a lot of pain from my injuries, but it helps when I train regularly. If I don't go to the gym for a week, my elbows and knees begin to ache badly. If I quit working out, I wouldn't be able to walk within a month.

I don't worry about the future, though. Life has been good to me. Things will work out as they were meant to be. I know that because there is one thing I have learned from my life experience:

When one journey is over, another is about to begin.

THE END

Table of Contents

Copyright 2

OTHER BOOKS PUBLISHED BY CROWBAR PRESS INCLUDE: 2

Acknowledgements 2

Tony Atlas Chronology 2

Testimonials 2

Chapter 1. Tony James-Caswell-McDuffy-White 2

Chapter 2. Redeye Hinton 2

Chapter 3. Lobster Tails and Scrambled Eggs 2

Chapter 4. Hercules 2

Chapter 5. The Telephone Call 2

Chapter 6. Learning the Ropes 2

Chapter 7. A Mattress, a Boxspring, and the Floor 2
Chapter 8. Black Atlas 2
Chapter 9. If the Walls Could Talk 2
Chapter 10. Mr. U.S.A 2
Chapter 11. Big Arms, Skinny Necks 2
Chapter 12. Racism in Wrestling 2
Chapter 13. Tennis Shoes 2
Chapter 14. That Thing 2
Chapter 15. Tag Team Champions 2
Chapter 16. My Worst Enemy 2
Chapter 17. The Downward Spiral 2
Chapter 18. The Black Superman 2
Chapter 19. Bruiser Brody 2
Chapter 20. Crossroads 2
Chapter 21. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." 2

Chapter 22. True Life 2

Chapter 23. New Life 2

Chapter 24. Credit Where Credit is Due 2